

“Inkosi Yetu Ngu Kamuzu Yedwa” (Our Only King Is Kamuzu): The M’mbelwa Ngoni’s relations with Hastings Kamuzu Banda in Malawi from 1964 to 1994

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural experiences of the M’mbelwa Ngoni who occupied the modern Mzimba District in Malawi from 1964 to 1994. Using written (primary and secondary) and oral sources, the article argues that although Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda (the first president of the Republic of Malawi) seemed to favour the Chewa people in his cultural policy, he was also on good terms with the M’mbelwa Ngoni compared to other groups in the country. Besides, the article argues that the M’mbelwa Ngoni took advantage of the seemingly dictatorial cultural policy under Dr Banda to preserve their unique traditions such as *Ingoma* (traditional Ngoni war dance but now performed during political and public events) among others. The article, thus, demonstrates that Banda’s cultural policy also allowed some cultural groups such as the Ngoni of Mzimba to promote their culture.

Keywords: Malawi; Mzimba District; M’mbelwa Ngoni; Cultural policy; Ingoma dance; Kamuzu Banda.

Introduction

This article discusses the way the M’mbelwa Ngoni of Mzimba District² were consolidated in Malawian culture between 1964 and 1994. These M’mbelwa Ngoni are mainly found in the northern region of Malawi (but few of their kinsmen are in Dowa and Ntchisi Districts in central region) hence their reference as Northern Ngoni.³ The article argues that the M’mbelwa Ngoni⁴ capitalised on the cultural

1 Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6594-4403>.

2 Malawi National Archives (Hereafter MNA), NNM1/24/10 Mzimba District Book Volume 1, 1 January 1949, notes that Mzimba District and its administrative headquarters take their names from the Mzimba river; Y Chondoka and F Bota, *A history of the Tumbuka from 1400 to 1900: The Tumbuka under the M’nyanjagha, Chewa, Balowoka, Senga and Ngoni chiefs* (Lusaka, Academic Press, 2007), p. 18, who say the word *Mzimba* means the “body” in Ngoni language and had its origins when the Ngoni used to say “Tiyogeza mzimba mumufuleni” meaning “we are going to bath our bodies in the river”.

3 M Read, *The Ngoni of Nyasaland* (London, Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 3-4.

4 J Thompson, “The origin, migration and settlement of the Northern Ngoni”, *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 34(1), 1981, pp. 6-35.

policies of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the first president of the Malawi Republic, to maintain their cultural practices between 1964 and 1994. Within the period in question, Banda developed a consistent cultural philosophy which centred on turning people into a tradition-bound nation. Banda shaped the policy through authoritarian strategies to the extent that scholars often criticised him for superimposing a national and yet divisive cultural identity in the country.⁵ What scholars fail to acknowledge is how Banda's cultural policy also allowed some groups such as the M'belwa Ngoni to promote their cultural identity. This article challenges aspects in Malawian historiography during Banda's rule (1964-1994) which has analysed the subject under discussion in terms of cultural dictatorship and divisive policies of Banda. However, it has inadequately acknowledged the general outlook of Banda's cultural policy of allowing some cultural groups such as the Ngoni of Mzimba in promoting their cultural sentiments.⁶

A brief history of M'belwa Ngoni up to 1964

The M'belwa Ngoni, who today are found in Mzimba District in the northern part of Malawi, were originally one of the several branches of Zwangendaba's followers formed out of a motley gathering of ethnic groupings. The name Ngoni was derived from Nguni, a term of salutation (*isithokozelo*) common to many agnatic clans in the modern KwaZulu-Natal Province region in South Africa.⁷ However, the term "Ngoni" (which means foreign people) was given to them by the Thonga of Mozambique.⁸ Later on, they also came to be referred to by a wide variety of names such as *Batuta/Watuta or Bututa, Mafiti, Mavitu, Magwangwara, Mazitu, Zowa, Wapoma, Wajoja, Landeens* and *Wamachonde*⁹ by the Ngoni conquered or raided to describe Ngoni's predatory and murderous methods of warfare.¹⁰

5 L Vail and L White, "Tribalism in the political history of Malawi", L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa* (London, James Currey, 1989) pp. 151-184; P Short, *Banda* (London and Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); PG Forster, "Culture, nationalism and the invention of tradition in Malawi", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, pp. 477-487; J Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A study in promise, power and paralysis* (Glasgow, Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1993).

6 Scholars such as B Mkandawire, "Ethnicity, language, and cultural violence: Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's Malawi, 1964-1994", *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 63(1), 2010, pp. 23-42; T Moyo, "Language politics and national identity in Malawi", *South African Journal of African Languages*, 4, 2002, pp. 262-272, have attacked Dr Banda's divisive and dictatorial tendencies.

7 J Barnes, *Politics in a changing society: A political history of the Fort Jameson Ngoni* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1967), p. 9.

8 D Fraser, *Winning a primitive people* (London, Seeley Service and Company, 1914), p. 311; E Ebner, *The history of the Wangoni*, reprint (Peramiho, Benedictine Publications, 2009), p. 148.

9 J Pike, "A Pre-colonial history of Malawi", *The Nyasaland Journal*, 18(1), 1965, p. 48; E Ebner, *The history of the Wangoni*... pp. 148-149.

10 MNA, S1/112F/34, District administration annual report, Northern Province-Mzimba-introductory notes by I O'Brien, the District Commissioner of Mzimba District in 1933.

The Ngoni, led by Zwangendaba, were one of the products of *mfecane* (unlimited warfare or great crushing) in Zulu language or *difaqane* in Sotho.¹¹ *Mfecane* was an upheaval in the modern Kwazulu-Natal Province region of South Africa where different leaders were fighting over the control of trade towards the route to Delagoa Bay and also over grazing land for their cattle herds among others.¹² In particular, the Ngoni left South Africa after the rise of Shaka Zulu who defeated the Ndwandwe under Zwide where Zwangendaba was one of his generals at the battle of Mhlathuze River in 1819. This forced a number of Nguni groups to flee northwards.¹³ During their trek northwards (passing through modern Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Zambia), Zwangendaba and his followers assimilated many ethnic groups.¹⁴ The M'belwa Ngoni emerged as a distinct group from the succession crisis that erupted after the death of Zwangendaba in 1848 in the Ufipa (at Mapupo to be specific) area in the south western part of modern Tanzania.¹⁵ After the crisis, the M'belwa Ngoni moved southwards passing through the Nyika plateau and came into Henga Valley at Ngo'nga in modern Rumphi District in Malawi. It was at Ng'onga where M'belwa, the son of Zwangendaba, was installed as their leader. From here, M'belwa Ngoni moved to several places until they reached Njuyu where the Livingstonia missionaries found them.¹⁶

The M'belwa Ngoni, led by Chimtungu Jere (a son of M'belwa I), came under the British protectorate rule on 24th October 1904, following a meeting between the then Governor Sir Alfred Sharpe and Ngoni leaders at Ekwendeni in Mzimba District.¹⁷ Chimtungu Jere had succeeded his father (M'belwa I) in 1898 who had died in 1891. At this meeting, the eight Ngoni chiefs agreed to submit to British administration in return for certain privileges including the right to spread out over the Tumbuka area.¹⁸ They also agreed that the authority of the hereditary chiefs would be upheld and decide minor disputes among their people but would assist colonial government officials in administration and tax collection.¹⁹ The Ngoni's entry into the treaty agreement with the British administrators can be compared to the British colonial rule in the Bechuanaland Protectorate (modern Botswana)

11 JD Omer-Cooper, *History of Southern Africa*, second edition, (London, James Currey Ltd, 1994), pp. 52-71.

12 JD Omer-Cooper, *History of Southern Africa...*, pp. 52-53; L Thompson, *A history of South Africa*, 3 (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 81-83; J Wright, "If we can't call it the *mfecane*, then what can we call it?: Moving the debate forward" (Paper, Institute for advanced Social Research Seminar, University of Witwatersrand, 29 August 1994), pp. 18-20; J Mvenene, "A social and economic history of the African people of Gcalekaland, 1830-1913", *Historia*, 59(1), 2014, pp. 59-62.

13 J Thompson, "The origins, migration...", *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 34(1), 1981, p. 10.

14 K Rennie, "Ngoni states and European intrusion", E Stokes and R Brown (eds.), *The Zambesian past...*, p. 303; JD Omer-Cooper, *History of Southern Africa...*, pp. 54-58.

15 Y Chibambo, *My Ngoni of Nyasaland* (London, Macmillan, 1952), pp. 31-35; Y Chondoka and F Bota, *A history of the Tumbuka...*, pp. 191-193.

16 Y Chibambo, *My Ngoni of Nyasaland...*, pp. 54-64.

17 MNA, S1/61H/32, Mzimba district administration annual reports, 1931.

18 MNA, S1/112 F/34, Mzimba district administration annual reports, 1934.

19 MNA, NNMI/24/1 Mzimba (Mombera) district book, 1 April, 1905.

where some Tswana groups such as the Bangwato incorporated the Babirwa (who were non-Tswana) into their communities and began collecting tax and purported to represent them to the British colonial government resulting into invisibility of the Babirwa to the colonial eye.²⁰ This kind of superiority was also noted in Maun where another Tswana group called the Batawana imposed their authority over other non-Tswana groups like the Wayeyi, Herero, Mbukushu among others.²¹

Later on during the independence struggle the Ngoni were part of those fighting for independence of Nyasaland (Malawi). This was also observed by the Mzimba District Commissioner who on 11th January 1961 reported to the Provincial Commissioner of Northern Province that “Mzimba had become considerably more politically conscious and active than hitherto”.²² Thus, by the time the country became independent in 1964, the M’mbelwa Ngoni had (culturally and politically) aligned themselves to the would-be leader, Banda for their identity’s survival.

The M’mbelwa Ngoni in Malawi’s cultural historiography

The M’mbelwa Ngoni cultural identity, like that of the Chewa, Tumbuka and Lomwe, has been a subject of scholarly attention, both from Malawi and abroad. In the colonial period, one argument has been that Christianity and colonialism weakened the strength of the Ngoni kinship, legal and administrative systems of justice and undermined their determination to stay together. For example, M Read who focussed on the socio-cultural ways of the Ngoni, attributed the decline of Ngoni culture in general to the influence of Christianity and Western education.²³ This view is also shared by K Rennie who argued that it was the advent of the European missionaries which upset the balance of power in Ngoniland whereby their subordinates such as the Tumbuka became very influential since they were the first to acquire Christianity and Western education.²⁴ Moreover, the Livingstonia mission, which established itself in the area, concentrated its efforts in the Northern region with the Tumbuka language as its chief means of communication.²⁵ Lastly, L Vail has attributed the decline of the Ngoni to their failure in adaptation to their

20 P Molosiwa, “‘The tragedy of the Ababirwa’: Cattle herding power and the socio-environmental history of the ethnic identity of the Babirwa in Botswana, 1920 to the Present” (PhD Thesis, university of Minnesota, 2013), p. 48.

21 L Nyati-Ramahobo, “Minority tribes in Botswana: The politics of recognition”, *Minority Rights Group International*, 2008, p. 3.

22 MNA, PCN1/1/11 administration, annual reports for all districts, instructions and correspondence- Northern Province, 1962.

23 M Read, *The Ngoni of Nyasaland* (London, Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 24; DD Phiri, “Some notes on the Ngoni clans of Malawi and the Ngoni celebrations held at Mabili in September 2001”, *Society of Malawi Journal*, 55(2), 2002, p. 67.

24 K Rennie, “Ngoni states...”, E Stokes and R Brown (eds.), *The Zambezi Past...*, pp. 303-311.

25 P Forster, *T Cullen Young: Missionary and anthropologist* (Blantyre, Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2003), p. 7; J McCracken, “Religion and politics in Northern Ngoniland, 1881-1904”, B Pachai (ed.), *Early History of Malawi* (London, Longman, 1972), pp. 216-231.

new permanent habitat as manifested by environmental degradation, rebellions by the indigenous Tumbuka, rinderpest disease outbreak in 1894 and western capitalism and colonialism which facilitated the disintegration of the Ngoni society.²⁶

However, scholars such as B Pachai have challenged the above by arguing that the M'belwa Ngoni were incorporated into colonial administration without losing much of their political authority.²⁷ This view was also corroborated by K Phiri who argued that the Ngoni have been responsible for forging a degree of political and cultural unity among themselves in the country since 1904.²⁸ Besides, J Thompson also argued that the Ngoni were able to manipulate the missionary and colonial political setup to fulfil their cultural traditions such as infusing their traditional songs into church hymns.²⁹ On her part, A Quinn observed that the Ngoni managed to manipulate their traditional values such as *Ncemo* (literally meaning "calling") into Christian teachings of the Livingstonia Synod which became a symbolic concept of Ngoni marriage with the Synod.³⁰

For the post-colonial period, most scholars have focussed on Malawian cultural identity in general. In this regard, some scholars have argued that Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the first president of the Republic of Malawi, promoted his own Chewa cultural identity as the national identity at the expense of other ethnic identities in Malawi.³¹ This made other scholars such as D Kaspin and A Thorold link historical experiences of Banda's ethnic favouritism with the modern behaviour of Malawians to vote presidential candidates (since 1994) based on regional and ethnic affiliations.³² This view has also been corroborated by B Osei-Hwedie who compared tribal cleavages in politics in Malawi and Zambia where she concluded that Malawi political divisions

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- 26 L Vail, "The making of the dead North: A study of Ngoni rule in Northern Malawi, 1855-1907", JB Peires (ed.), *Before and after Shaka: Papers in Nguni History* (Grahamstown, Rhodes University Press, 1981), pp. 230-255.
- 27 B Pachai, "African initiatives in local administration: The case of the M'belwa African Administrative Council", RJ MacDonald (ed.) *From Nyasaland to Malawi* (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1975), pp. 189-212; B Pachai, "Ngoni politics and diplomacy in Malawi, 1848-1904", B Pachai, (ed.) *Early history of Malawi* (London, Longman, 1972), pp. 179-207.
- 28 K Phiri, "Something for which to remember them: The concepts of political unity and cultural identity in the history of the Ngoni in Mzimba District since 1904" (Paper, Local History and Culture conference, Mzuzu University, 28-30 August 2007).
- 29 J Thompson, "Donald Fraser and the Ngoni" (PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, 1982), p. 213; J Thompson, *Ngoni, Xhosa and Scot* (Zomba, Kachere Series, 2007), where the Ngoni interacted with the Scottish and Xhosa missionaries for their religious, cultural and political survival.
- 30 A Quinn, "Holding on to mission christianity: Case studies from a Presbyterian church in Malawi", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 25(4), 1995, pp. 387-411.
- 31 B Mkandawire, "Ethnicity, language, and cultural violence...", *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 63(1), 2010, pp. 23-42; T Moyo, "Language politics...", *South African Journal of African Languages*, 4, 2002, pp. 262-272; L Vail and L White, "Tribalism...", L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa...*, pp. 151-184; P Short, *Banda...*; P Forster, "Culture, nationalism...", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, pp. 477-497; J Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A study in promise, power and paralysis* (Glasgow, Dudu Nsomba Publications, 1993).
- 32 D Kaspin, "The politics of ethnicity in Malawi's democratic transition", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33(4), December 1995, pp. 595-620; A Thorold, "Regionalism, tribalism and multiparty democracy: The case of Malawi", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 7(2), 2000, pp. 135-139.

were already deep before and after 1994 elections.³³ On his part, D Posner specified that the Chewas and Tumbukas of Zambia (unlike their Malawian counterparts) have been united due to President Kenneth Kaunda's commitment to national unity in Zambia as compared to divisive politics of Malawi's President Kamuzu Banda.³⁴ Most recently, some scholars have debated on the resurgence of ethnic associations in the country which they feel would pose a threat to Malawi's future unity. For example, G Kayira et-al have been sceptical about the future peaceful coexistence of the several ethnic associations in Malawi due to the view that some, such as *Mulhako wa Alhomwe*, have been an avenue of both cultural unity and political mobilisation.³⁵ However, M Lusaka has contended that the ethnic associations stimulate ethnic competitions, conflicts, and divisions in contemporary Malawi.³⁶

Image 1: A map of Malawi showing the Ngoni and other ethnic groups



Source: PG Forster, *T Cullen Young: Missionary and anthropologist* (Blantyre, Christian Literature Association in Malawi, 2003), p. xiv.

- 33 B Osei-Hwedie, "The role of ethnicity in multi-party politics in Malawi and Zambia", *Journal of contemporary African Studies*, 16(2), 1998, pp. 228-247.
- 34 DN Posner, "The political salience of cultural difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas are allies in Zambia and adversaries in Malawi", *The American Political Science Review*, 98(4), November, 2004, pp. 529-545.
- 35 G Kayira, P Banda and A Robinson, "Ethnic associations and politics in contemporary Malawi", *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 13(4), 2019, pp. 718-738.
- 36 M Lusaka, "Dividing the nation or promoting unity? Ethnic based associations and production of heritage in Malawi", K Ross and W Mulwafu (eds.), *Politics, christianity and society in Malawi: Essays in honour of John McCracken* (Mzuzu, MZUNI Press, 2020), pp. 372-395.

While the earlier scholars have contributed enormously to the ethnic and cultural history of Malawi, they have not focused on the relationship between Banda and the Ngoni culture in the Malawi historiography which is the centre of attention of this article.

Banda's cultural policy

At independence, personal characteristics of the national leader were extremely important determinants of government policies in the new African states. For example in Tanzania, Julius Nyerere (the first president of Tanzania) was honoured as *Mwalimu* (teacher) while his counterpart in Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah was hailed as *Osagyefo* (the redeemer).³⁷ In Malawi, Kamuzu Banda was hailed as *Mpulumutsi* ("messiah" or "saviour") as somebody who possessed supernatural or divine wisdom, and as *Ngwazi* (conqueror) meaning he was brave and invincible in his destruction of colonial rule.³⁸ However, it should be noted that Banda's political ideology was not clear as was the case with Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia's humanism which was based on Marxism-Leninism or Socialism.³⁹ Despite the above scenario, Banda's cultural policy needs to be critically analysed in order to understand the history of Malawi.

In appreciating Banda's cultural policy, one also needs to understand various factors that influenced his decisions which in the long run became controversial, as observed by some scholars.⁴⁰ Among the factors, George Shepperson (a British historian) observed:⁴¹

... Banda's consciousness in his Chewa identity is manifested in the 1930s in Chicago where he provided four Chewa songs to be included in the massive Negro anthology made by Nancy Cunard... Banda's passion for his culture grew even more to the extent that in 1951 he wrote to J Rangeley, the Provincial Commissioner from his London address discussing Chewa history where he boasted of knowing Chewa customs better than the younger men born in twenties or thirties and accused them of imitating the incorrect use of Chichewa words instead of correcting those Europeans.

Banda's own cultural consciousness was also influenced by his stay in Britain and Ghana. After qualifying as a medical doctor in the United States of America in 1938,

37 F Stark, "Theories of contemporary state formation in Africa", *Journal of Modern African studies*, 24(2), 1986, pp. 335-338; A Mazrui, "Cultural forces in African politics: In search of a synthesis", I Mowoe and R Bjornson (eds.), *Africa and the West* (New York, Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 45.

38 R Chirambo, "A monument to a tyrant, 'or remonstrated nationalist memories of the father and founder of the Malawi Nation'", *Africa Today*, 56(4) 2010, pp. 2-21.

39 O Kalinga, "The production of history in Malawi in the 1960's: The legacy of Sir Harry Johnston, the influence of the Society of Malawi and the role of Dr Kamuzu Banda and his Malawi Congress Party", *African Affairs*, 97(389), 1998, p. 544; KY Best, a news correspondent, *The African Newspaper*, 30(22), 9 November-22 November 1979, pp. 1-2 where Kaunda's ideology is challenged by the Church Council of Zambia in July 1979 for its much focus on scientific socialism at the expense of Christian values.

40 D Kaspin, "The politics of ethnicity...", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33(4), 1995, pp. 595-620.

41 G Shepperson, "Memories of Dr Banda", *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 51(1), 1998, pp. 74-84.

Banda moved to Britain to obtain a medical license for him to practice as a physician in the British Empire. While in Scotland, Banda was amazed by the hypocrisy of the Scottish missionaries with regard to what they could term as “evil” in Nyasaland but cherished in Scotland such as beer drinking and dancing of married men while holding the wives of other men.⁴² With his cultural consciousness in mind, Banda later met and befriended Thomas Cullen Young, a Scottish missionary during Banda’s school time in Nyasaland. Among others, Cullen Young influenced Banda by suggesting the name *Maravi* to would-be independent Nyasaland. In 1953, Banda left Britain for Gold Coast (later Ghana) in disgust about the British imposition of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.⁴³ During Banda’s stay in Gold Coast between 1953 and 1958, he witnessed the country attaining independence where its founding President Kwame Nkrumah changed it to Ghana, the name of an ancient empire.⁴⁴ It seemed certain that Banda was already thinking of pressing for such a change if given opportunity in Nyasaland. Indeed, when Nyasaland attained independence in 1964, it also changed the name to Malawi.⁴⁵ The name Malawi means flames of fire and traces its origin from the earliest Bantu immigrants called the Maravi or Malawi from the modern Democratic Republic of Congo in the thirteenth century AD.⁴⁶

The last factor was Banda’s heroic welcome from Ghana at Chileka Airport in Blantyre, Nyasaland on 6th July 1958 and his relations with young nationalists.⁴⁷ The young nationalists who became Banda’s cabinet ministers regarded headmen and chiefs as “stooges” of colonial government but Banda soon found himself uncomfortable with such “new men” as political colleagues, hence gathered support from the older Malawians.⁴⁸

By the time Banda returned to Malawi in 1958, he was a man who had struggled with significance and importance of his African heritage.⁴⁹ Banda pursued the idea of creating a composite culture as reflected in his dressing where he used to put on western suits, representing European (English in particular) lifestyle,⁵⁰ but with a flywhisk which symbolised his African identity.⁵¹ In promoting Malawian culture, President Banda made populist appeal that Malawi would obtain democracy based

42 P Forster, “Culture, nationalism...”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, pp. 485-486.

43 O Kalinga, “The production of history in Malawi in the 1960’s...”, *African Affairs*, 97(389), 1998, p. 539.

44 P Forster, “Culture, nationalism...”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, pp. 483-485.

45 O Kalinga, “The production of history in Malawi in the 1960’s...”, *African Affairs*, 97(389), 1998, p.539.

46 YM Juwayeyi, *Archaeology and oral tradition in Malawi: Origins and early history of the Chewa* (Cape Town, University of Cape Town Press, 2020), pp. 36-39.

47 P Forster, “Culture, nationalism...”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, p. 488.

48 P Forster, “Culture, nationalism...”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, pp.488-489.

49 K Phiri, “Dr Banda’s cultural legacy and its implications for a democratic Malawi”, KM Phiri and KR Ross (eds.), *Democratisation in Malawi: A stocktaking* (Mzuzu, Luviri Press, Reprint, 2020), p. 177.

50 L Mphande, “Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi writers group: The (un)making of a cultural tradition”, *Research in African Literatures*, 27(1), 1996, p. 81

51 K Phiri quoting Crosby, “Dr Banda’s cultural legacy...”, KM Phiri and KR Ross (eds.), *Democratisation in Malawi: ...*, p. 171.

on the old African institutions such as that of chieftainship.⁵² This attitude prompted Banda to establish the Censorship Board in 1972 to screen out extreme Western influences in the areas of literature, films and other related mediums.⁵³ Apart from that, Banda also facilitated the enactment of the decency in Dressing Code Act in 1973 which banned the western concepts of wearing of miniskirts and bell-bottomed trousers, and disallowed men from keeping long hair.⁵⁴ Banda encouraged women to put on *duku* (head scarf or wrap) and *chitenje* (wrapper)⁵⁵ whereas men were expected to be presentable enough. Banda was, thus, determined to create not only an “African” or “Malawian” culture that would be free from Western infiltration, but also a single Malawian culture out of the country’s many cultural traditions.

However, to come up with a standardised Malawian culture out of different cultural traditions in the country, Banda singled out Chewa culture of central Malawi to represent the so called ‘Malawian’ culture.⁵⁶ This could be compared to Seretse Khama, the first president of Botswana, who also promoted and recognised his Tswana cultural identity as synonymous with Botswana nationhood. In this regard, any non-Tswana cultural agitation was viewed as divisive and contrary to Botswana national building.⁵⁷ For Banda, his argument was that having a common language would weld Malawi’s ethnic cultures into one national culture. Banda’s own 1966 speech corroborates this view.⁵⁸

There will always be tribes in this country... [and] there will always be regions... But these tribal designations, these regional designations, must exist, and we must recognise them, only as a means of identifying ourselves as true Malawians... I value my being a Chewa from Kasungu in the Central Region, only because and only as ... (it) [sic] stamps on my forehead the sign that I am a true Malawian... We have no longer a collection of tribes in this country now. We are a nation. Therefore, we must think more of ourselves as Malawians and less, much less, as Nkondes, Tongas, Ngonis, Chewas, Yaos, Nyanjas, Senas.

52 P Forster, “Culture, nationalism...”, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, p. 489.

53 P Short, *Banda...*, pp. 279-280.

54 R Rose, “Malawi in the 1970s: Official attitudes to dress and appearance and the drafting of legislation to ban ‘bell bottom’ trousers”, *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 56(2), 2003, pp. 28-36; C Kambili, “Ethics of African tradition: Prescription of a dress code in Malawi 1965-1973”, *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 55(2), 2002, pp. 80-99; P Short, *Banda...*, pp. 279-280.

55 KM Phiri, “Dr Banda’s cultural legacy...”, KM Phiri and KR Ross (eds.), *Democratisation in Malawi: ...*, p. 180.

56 L Vail and L White, “Tribalism...”, L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa...*, p. 182; B Mkandawire, “Ethnicity, language, and cultural violence...”, *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 63(1), 2010, pp. 23-42; T Moyo, “Language politics...”, *South African Journal of African Languages*, 4, 2002, pp. 262-272, for detailed accounts on Banda’s divisive and dictatorial policies.

57 L Nyathi-Ramahobo, “The language policy, cultural rights and the law in Botswana”, M Putz, J Fishman and J Neff-van Aertselaer (eds.), *Along the routes of power: Explorations of empowerment through language* (Berlin, Walter de Gruyter and Company, 2006), pp. 285-303.

58 *Malawi Parliamentary Hansard*, 20th May 1966, Cited in Short, *Banda...*, pp. 266-267.

Despite the sentiments on Malawi's national identity, Banda imposed Chewa culture on Malawians which became synonymous with Malawian cultural identity. The initial step began with the elevation of Chichewa as a national language because Banda held a belief that the Nyanja and Mang'anja peoples, whose ChiNyanja language was predominantly spoken in the Southern region of the country, were basically all Chewas.⁵⁹ Banda also felt that ChiNyanja language was fully anglicised by the Blantyre missionaries.⁶⁰ He, therefore, desired to use a "pure" Chewa language which he spoke as a young man in the villages of Kasungu District of central Malawi.⁶¹ As a result, Banda demanded for orthographic standardisation of Chichewa to take out "western" excesses. Consequently, in 1972, the government of Malawi instituted the Chichewa Board to do this work of language standardization. This led the Chewa culture considered synonymous with Malawian culture by virtue of being the most ancient and least influenced by colonialism.⁶²

Ngoni search for a cultural space

Although Banda seemed to favour the Chewa in his cultural policy,⁶³ he was also in good terms with the M'belwa Ngoni compared to other groups in the country. Banda's admiration and love for the Ngoni manifested through political rallies and national celebrations where the most favoured groups performed last.⁶⁴ For example, in the Central Region, the entry of *Gulewamkulu* (literary "big dance") or *Nyau* (the Chewa's secret society dance where dancers hid in masks to depict ancestral spirits or wild animals)⁶⁵ and Malawi Congress Party (MCP) women dances popularly known as *Mbumba za Kamuzu* (Banda's women) in the dancing arena were always indicating the closure of dancing ceremonies. In the case of the Northern region, *Ingoma* dance of the Ngoni from Mzimba was performed last and Banda was always joining and dancing with them in the arena.⁶⁶ Gradually, *Ingoma* became a source of pride even to Banda's foreign dignitaries. For instance, in 1988 Margaret Thatcher, the then British Prime Minister, was entertained to this Ngoni dance during her official visit to Malawi.⁶⁷

59 P Short, *Banda...*, p. 273.

60 L Vail and L White, "Tribalism...", L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa...*, p. 166.

61 P Short, *Banda...*, p. 273.

62 L Vail and L White, "Tribalism...", L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa...*, p. 182.

63 KM Phiri, "Dr Banda's cultural legacy...", KM Phiri and KR Ross (eds.), *Democratisation in Malawi: ...*, pp. 182-184.

64 J Nyirenda, "Ngoni culture, missionary Christianity, and the modern state: The case of Mpherembe's area in Mzimba district, 1899-1994" (MA Thesis, University of Malawi, 2011), pp. 69-70.

65 H Kachapila, "Remarkable adaptability': Gender, identity and social change among the Chewa of central Malawi, 1870-1945" (PhD Thesis, Dalhousie University, 2001), p. 31.

66 J Nyirenda (Personal Collection-Hereafter JNPC), interview, K Nkosi (local historian, Mzimba district), 30 March 2021; GC Jere (member of royal Jere family and Ex-Malawi Young Pioneer, Mzimba district), 16 July 2021; H Hara (local historian, Mzimba District), 16 July 2021; O Kalinga, "The production of history in Malawi in the 1960's...", *African Affairs*, 97(389), 1998, pp. 523-549.

67 BF Kandoole and KM Phiri, *Twenty-five years of independence in Malawi* (Blantyre, Dzuka Publishing Company, 1989), p. 38.

Additionally, whenever Banda was on a visit to the Northern region of Malawi, he would be met by Ngoni men dressed in what was considered traditional attire such as animal skins of lions or leopards (similar to Zulu traditional wear),⁶⁸ singing and chanting war songs praising him.⁶⁹ In short, Banda had a partiality for the M'belwa Ngoni who were favoured more than other ethnic groups in Northern Malawi.

The Ngoni search for cultural space was as old as their settlement in Malawi. The Ngoni enjoyed a reputation as historical effective soldiers and administrators. Cultural brokers like Yesaya Chibambo and Charles Chidongo Chinula celebrated and publicised the Ngoni achievements tracing their migration from Natal in South Africa, victories in battlefields, capacity to build highly-centralized states, and their seemingly unified culture, among others.⁷⁰ This made M'belwa Ngoni attract cordial relations with Banda until he was edged out of power in 1994 despite his government's constantly attacking the vested interests of the northern petty bourgeoisie. Among the vested interests of the north were the removal of Chitumbuka language from the press and schools in 1968 and the imposition of a quota system in education which was viewed as a means of punishing the North.⁷¹ Moreover, in 1989, the Malawi government blamed teachers from the north for poor education standards in other regions hence ordered all teachers to teach in their respective regions.⁷² As that was not enough, on 9th February 1989, *Boma Lathu*, a Malawi government newspaper, published Banda's speech at Kasiya in Lilongwe denouncing proud behaviour of some people of Northern region.⁷³

Banda's earlier relations with the Ngoni can be traced back between 1947 and 1950. For instance, he wrote a letter to M'belwa II in 1947.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Banda's close ties with M'belwa Ngoni can also be detected in his letter dated 26 July 1950 to his uncle Hannock Msokera Phiri and he wrote:⁷⁵

Dear Uncle,

Thank you very much for your letter, of 10th July. I am very glad that you

68 DD Phiri, "Some notes on the Ngoni Clans of Malawi and the Ngoni celebrations held at Mabili in September 2001", *Society of Malawi Journal*, 55(2), 2002, p. 69, for the picture of Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi's Zulu cultural attire.

69 O Kalinga, "The production of history in Malawi in the 1960's...", *African Affairs*, 97(389), 1998, p. 543.

70 L Vail and L White, "Tribalism...", L Vail (ed.), *The creation of tribalism in Southern Africa...*, pp. 160-162.

71 B Mkandawire, "Ethnicity, language, and cultural violence...", *The Society of Malawi Journal*, 63(1), 2010, pp. 29-35.

72 J Davison, *Gender, lineage, and ethnicity in Southern Africa* (Colorado and Oxford, Westview Press, 1997), p. 156.

73 *Boma Lathu* Newspaper, 17(2), February 1989, p. 1.

74 JNPC, interview, N Thole (co-founding member of Mzimba Heritage Association, Mzimba District), 1 March 2021; B Soko (co-founding member of Mzimba Heritage Association, Mzimba district), 3 March 2021; B Jere (member of royal Jere family and member of Mzimba Heritage Association, Mzimba district), 5 March 2021.

75 Archives online at Indiana University, HK Banda archive, African Studies Collection Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, Dr HK Banda Correspondence, Folder 4, 26 July 1950, a letter from Banda to Hannock Msokera Phiri written on 26 July 1950 (Available at <https://purl.dlib.indiana.edu>, as accessed on 12 June 2021).

went to Mzimba to see Rev. Chinula and Mberwa (sic). I am also glad to think that the land given me by Chief Mbelwa (sic) is very good. I shall begin work ther (sic) next year. It is too late this year and I have not budgeted for it this year...

It is my intention to have a large farm there in Mzimba District. It is a very good land for maize and beans and there are many people who could work for me...

So from the letter, it can be deduced that Banda had good relations with M'mbelwa Ngoni to the extent that he was given land for his farming enterprises.

In 1952, Banda found an opportunity to meet the paramount chief Inkosi M'mbelwa II in London. This was after M'mbelwa II had raised funds in Mzimba (each household contributing three pence) for the trip to London to meet the Queen of United Kingdom to express the Ngoni's displeasure about the federation.⁷⁶ While in London, Banda and M'mbelwa II agreed on a number of issues such as agriculture and strategizing self-government status for Nyasaland.⁷⁷

After few days of his return to Malawi on 6th July 1958, Banda and Kanyama Chiume went to Edingeni (Inkosi Mmbelwa's headquarters) and spent ten days with Mmbelwa II. While at Edingeni, Banda was offered a shield, spear and knobkierrie signifying him as a prowess fighter against the Central African Federation.⁷⁸ Later on, Banda and M'mbelwa II left Edingeni for Hora area (still in Mzimba district) to look for land to open an agricultural scheme (as part of their agreement in London in 1952) which marked the beginning of the M'mbelwa Farm Institute where farmers were trained in livestock and other agricultural productions.⁷⁹ Then on 3rd March 1959 state of emergency was declared in Nyasaland and Banda was arrested and sent to Gweru prison in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe).⁸⁰ In the same year on 19th November, M'mbelwa II died.⁸¹ After Banda was released from Gweru prison on 1st April 1960,⁸² the M'mbelwa Ngoni accorded him a Ngoni military title *Ngwazi*, (meaning a "fierce and invincible warrior") because he had destroyed

76 JNPC, interview, SM Nkosi (local historian, Mzimba district) 10 May 2021; E Mgonezulu (counsellor on Ngoni traditions, Mzimba district), 16 July 2021; N Thole, 1 March 2021; B Soko, 3 March 2021; B Jere 5 March 2021.

77 JNPC, interview, H Nkhambule (*Inkosana-a* Ngoni political position below chieftainship level, Mzimba district), 14 June 2021; N Thole, 1 March 2021; B Soko, 3 March 2021.

78 JNPC, interview, B Jere, 5 March 2021; H Hara, 16 July 2021.

79 JNPC, interview, N Thole, 1 March 2021; B Soko, 3 March 2021; B Jere, 5 March 2021; W Mkandawire (local historian, Mzimba district), 16 March 2021; SM Nkosi, 10 May 2021 (For years about its establishment see: <https://cals.arizona.edu>malawi>Plus>appb> Malawi's agricultural schemes, as accessed on 20 August 2021).

80 KM Phiri, J McCracken and WO Mulwafu (eds.), *Malawi in crisis: The 1959/60 Nyasaland state of emergency and its legacy* (Zomba, Kachere Series, 2012).

81 JNPC, interview, B Soko, 3 March 2021; B Jere, 5 March 2021; C Tembo (retired teacher and a historian, Mzimba district), 28 May 2021.

82 J McCracken, *A history of Malawi 1859-1966* (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2012), p. 364.

the hated Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland.⁸³ In return, Banda reciprocated by enthroning M'belwa III (born Mackson Makamaka Mthusane Jere) in 1961 as leader of the northern or Mzimba Ngoni.⁸⁴

Banda also showed his passion for the Ngoni as a great people, especially in his public rallies, by citing Ngoni history beginning from Shaka Zulu's biography, Ngoni migration under Zwangendaba and their settlement in Malawi.⁸⁵ In addition to the above, Banda made M'belwa III become the chief judge of Malawi's Traditional Court seconded by Chief Mzukuzuku of Embangweni of Mzimba District.⁸⁶ As that was not enough, M'belwa III was treated with special attention as he would sometimes fly to Lilongwe or MCP conventions using Malawi Army's Dornier plane sent by Banda.⁸⁷ Banda also made sure that all regional ministers for the north were coming from Mzimba District only.⁸⁸

Furthermore, Banda also appointed one of the Ngoni chiefs, *Inkosi* (chief) Mzikubola III (born Chifwede Jere) to be one of his trusted diplomats to Germany and later on to the United States of America.⁸⁹ This was testified by Chifwede Jere's widow who said that they had lived abroad from 1973 to 1990.⁹⁰ The M'belwa Ngoni chiefs also benefitted a lot from Banda as he built them houses.⁹¹ All M'belwa Ngoni chiefs such as Mtwalo, Mpherembe, Chindi, Mabilabo, Mzukuzuku, Mzikubola, and their paramount, M'belwa were beneficiaries to such a scheme. This project started in 1977 as narrated by late Chifwede Jere's son Masabane Jere.⁹²

The Ngoni chiefs' houses project was initiated by my father Chifwede Jere who was by then working in the United States of America as a diplomat. My father requested an audience with Kamuzu Banda who was then on a holiday in the United Kingdom. He reminded Kamuzu of promising to take care of all the widows left by M'belwa II. Chifwede felt that the promise was not

83 JNPC, interview, B Soko, 3 March 2021; B Jere, 5 March 2021; K Nkosi, 30 March 2021; H Hara, 16 July 2021; RM Chirambo, "A monument to a tyrant", or remonstrated nationalist memories of the father and founder of the Malawi nation", *Africa Today*, 56(4), 2010, pp. 2-21.

84 JNPC, interview, B Jere, 5 March 2021.

85 O Kalinga, "The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960's...", *African Affairs*, 97(389), October 1998, pp. 542-543.

86 JNPC, interview, M Jere, (incumbent chief Mzukuzuku, Mzimba district), 1 May 2021; E Mgonezulu, 16 July 2021.

87 JNPC, interview, B Soko, 3 March 2021.

88 JNPC, interview; N Thole, 1 March 2021; B Jere, 5 March 2021; C Tembo, 28 May 2021; Also see HC Banda, *Malawi Parliament: Origins, reforms and practices*, (Lilongwe, Pan African Publishers Limited, 2014), pp. 206-215 for details about such regional ministers' names.

89 JNPC, interview, B Soko, 3 March 2021; B Jere, 5 March 2021.

90 JNPC, interview, M Makwakwa (widow to late Chifwede Jere, Chief Mzikubola III, Mzimba district), 30 April 2021.

91 JNPC, interview, W Shumba, (woman counsellor and local historian, Mzimba district), 4 May 2021; SP Jere (member of royal Jere family and a commercial farmer, Mzimba district), 15 July, 2021; P Forster, "Culture, nationalism...", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32(3), 1994, p. 491.

92 JNPC, interview, M Jere ('incumbent' Mzikubola IV and son to late Chifwede Jere, Mzikubola III, Mzimba district), 30 April 2021.

fulfilled because the widows of M'mbelwa and all other chiefs were living in dilapidated houses. So the project started and by 1984 all Ngoni chiefs were built a house.

The M'mbelwa Ngoni enjoyed good relations with Banda save for one incident around late 1980s when *Inkosi* (chief) Chindi III, Chrispine William Jere, of Euthini section complained about habitual or forceful gifts to Banda while on his official visits.⁹³ Chindi's remarks irked Banda to the extent that he wanted to dethrone him and evict him from the house constructed by Banda's government. But Chindi resisted and even refused eviction by arguing that 'the land belonged to his forefathers hence they should just demolish the house but leave the land'.⁹⁴ This wrangle went on but the Ngoni chiefs stood firm to the extent that the Chindi chieftaincy was restored.⁹⁵

In return, the M'mbelwa Ngoni tried to align themselves with Banda by adapting their songs and praise poems for Zwangendaba and other heroes to praise Banda during mass rallies.⁹⁶ Most of their *Ingoma* songs were now changed to *Chitumbuka* language in order to accommodate the Tumbuka people who had already outnumbered the Ngoni due to their numerical strength, while maintaining the original tunes of their songs.⁹⁷ Among the songs was one titled, '*aNgwazi wayowoya limaninge chomene ndalama zili mudongo*' (the Ngwazi is saying that we should focus on farming because our wealth is generated from soil).⁹⁸ This song was also sung to please Banda who regarded agriculture in high esteem.⁹⁹

The Ngoni also composed vilifying songs to Banda's enemies after the cabinet crisis of September 1964 when the Prime Minister Banda disagreed with his cabinet which led to dismissing some while others resigned in sympathy of their dismissed friends.¹⁰⁰ Among them was that which attacked Kanyama Chiume and went like:¹⁰¹

Leading vocals (men): *Inkosi yetu ngu Kamuzu Yedwa!* (Our only King is Kamuzu!) x2

Backing vocals (both men and women): *Inkosi yetu ngu Kamuzu*

93 JNPC, interview, C Nyirenda (retired worker in the banking sector, Mzimba district), 29 March 2021; C Mahobe (farmer, Mzimba district), 30 April 2021; H Nkhambule, 14 June 2021.

94 JNPC, interview, C Nyirenda, 29 March 2021; E Mgomozulu, 16 July 2021.

95 JNPC, interview, M Nyirenda (villager, Mzimba district), 30 March 2021; BN Tembo (Group Village Headman, Mzimba district), 28 May 2021.

96 B Soko, "Innovation and change: The survival of Ngoni oral traditions in Malawi" (Paper, Oral Tradition and Innovation Conference, University of Natal, 8-11 July 1991). pp. 17-23; DD Phiri, "Some notes on the Ngoni clans of Malawi and the Ngoni celebrations held at Mabili in September 2001", *Society of Malawi Journal*, 55(2), 2002, p. 70.

97 B Soko, "Innovation and change...", p.16.

98 JNPC, interview, W Shumba, 4 May 2021; BN Tembo, 28 May 2021; Steven Nkosi interviewed on 10th May 2021.

99 JNPC, interview, GC Jere, 16 July 2021.

100 J McCracken, *A history of Malawi 1859-1966* (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2012), pp. 429-460.

101 JNPC, interview, W Mkandawire, 16th March 2021; W Shumba 4 May 2021; H Hara, 16 July 2021.

Yedwa! (Our only King is Kamuzu!) x2

Chorus (both men and women): *Cha Kanyama phuma Uhambe!* (You, bad Kanyama, be banished!) x2.

Thus, the Ngoni composed the above song to assure Banda of their allegiance and loyalty under his leadership while at the same time disparaging the ex-cabinet minister Kanyama Chiume.¹⁰² In this way, the M'belwa Ngoni took advantage of preserving their unique traditions, such as *Ingoma* dance among others as long as Banda continued admiring their cultural traits.

Conclusion

This article has examined and historicised the cultural experiences of the M'belwa Ngoni who occupy the modern Mzimba District in Malawi. The article has demonstrated that Banda's cultural policies allowed some cultural groups such as the Ngoni of Mzimba to promote their culture. This made the M'belwa Ngoni, apart from the Chewa, enjoy cordial relations with Banda unlike other groups. In search for their cultural space, the M'belwa Ngoni aligned themselves with Banda by adapting their old and composing new songs to praise Banda during mass rallies. This sort of alliance between the M'belwa Ngoni and Banda continued until Banda was edged out of power in 1994. Conclusively, this article has challenged the earlier Malawi's historiography which failed to acknowledge Banda's cultural policy of allowing some cultural groups such as the Ngoni of Mzimba in promoting their cultural sentiments.

¹⁰² JNPC, interview, W Mkandawire, 16th March 2021; W Shumba 4 May 2021; H Hara, 16 July 2021.