JORDAN MSUMBA, BEN NGEMELA AND THE LAST CHURCH OF GOD AND HIS CHRIST
1924-1935

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The literature on the development of independent churches in colonial Malawi during the inter-war period is increasing. Reasons for the emergence of these churches have been examined and attempts have also been made to classify them. However, one of the most successful of the breakaway churches, the Last Church of God and His Christ, founded in northern Malawi in 1924, in spite of its popularity with peasants, has barely attracted the attention of scholars. It has been dismissed by some as having a simplistic approach to life and has been mentioned only in passing by others studying the subject of independency. Furthermore, a preoccupation with a search for sects which were anti-colonial in nature and whose leadership was actively involved in proto-nationalist movements has also meant that churches such as the Last Church which were not so political, have not been adequately studied. Only two recent seminar papers have been devoted entirely to the Last Church: one approached it from the Karonga/Ngonde point of view and the other, marred by many inaccuracies, considered it from the Mzimba/Ngoni position. This paper seeks to reconstruct the early history of the latter church concentrating on two of its founders, Jordan Msumba and Ben Ngemela. The paper does not claim to be a definitive study but it is hoped that it will help eliminate some of the misunderstanding surrounding the Last Church.

Jordan Msumba was born at Usisya in Chief Mbwana’s area of modern Malawi. His date of birth is not known but records show that by the early 1900s Msumba had passed through elementary schools under the Livingstonia Mission system. Some time between 1907 and 1909 he joined Eliot Kamwana Chirwa’s flourishing
Watch Tower Society and became one of its lay preachers in West Nyasa (presentday Nkata Bay) which was also Kamwana’s home. When in late 1909 the colonial government became disturbed by Kamwana’s preachings, especially his references to the ending of European rule, and deported him to South Africa, Msumba followed him.7 There he came in contact with Joseph Booth who was closely associated with Kamwana and many other African religious leaders in Nyasaland. Booth had been deported from Nyasaland in 1904 for his association with Africans of the colony and because of his advocacy of pro-African policies which the colonial government deemed dangerous. It is not clear how close relations were between Msumba and Booth but, according to Kenneth Lohrentz, Msumba was one of the Nyasas working in South Africa who studied under Booth “for a period of four to six months and [Booth] taught them the rather confused combination of Watch Tower teachings and sabbatarianism to which he then adhered”.8 Msumba was probably a Baptist at this stage of his life but Booth’s teaching became a factor in Msumba’s own approach to religion.

We cannot be sure when Msumba returned to Nyasaland but we know that in 1917 he was in trouble with the colonial government for meddling in local politics. In that year his uncle, Balakaza, who had been principal headman under Chief Mbwana of West Nyasa died and was succeeded by an outside candidate, Mbabuli, instead of Jordan Msumba who “was considered unsuitable for the position”.9 This action seems to have induced Jordan to return to South Africa where present evidence suggests he rejoined the Watch Tower Society. Lohrentz suggests that in South Africa Msumba, along with another West Nyasa activist, Anton Chirwa, left the Seventh Day Baptist—which they had joined upon their contact with Booth—and returned to the Watch Tower fold under Kamwana because “Booth was not fulfilling his promise of sending money for teachers”.10 Apparently Booth had promised his Nyasaland associates aid in the educational field but had not been able to live up to his word.

In 1920 Msumba was “repatriated from South Africa because he was a “lunatic”.11 Evidence of his lunacy has not been provided. Although it is difficult to believe that he was mentally disturbed, it is possible that the political activities of many Nyasas, some of whom were linked with the trade unionist Clements Kadalie, formerly of West Nyasa, may have displeased the South African