RELIGIOUS INDEPENDENCY AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL ADVANCE IN NORTHERN NYASALAND IN THE 1930s

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[Following World War I] White control of church — and school — was strongly re-asserted and a series of quarrels began with the best-educated of the African converts, quarrels which were to produce the early independent church movements of Nyasaland. 1)

...pastors and teachers were prominent in helping to form a series of organizations, all designed to bring pressure on the central problem of lack of colonial development... 2)

Africa is in need of a church that would correspond with her God-given customs and manners. The aim of this church is the uplifting of the African... and [the restoration of] an atmosphere of a deep... naturally religious life as prevailed in the day of long ago. 3)

Their very discontent is a measure of their progress. 4)

The scholarly study of what may alternatively be termed "proto-nationalism" or "the developing African self-awareness" particularly in the period between the two World Wars, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. 5) Indeed, works with at least some pretensions to serious scholarship still find their way into print which totally ignore the events

that took place and the attitudes that took shape during these crucial decades. 6)

This article will attempt merely to hint at the richness of the material susceptible of further study and to indicate once again the degree of interaction among key personalities, many possessing close familial relationships. 7) The establishment and development of a number of churches will be briefly examined, all originating in the Northern Province of Nyasaland in the years 1926 to 1935. 8)

As for the antecedents of these churches, the Livingstonia Mission of the United Free Church of Scotland must be granted a major role as their, perhaps involuntary, progenitor. 9) It will be apparent that the furtherance of educational opportunity loomed large in the aspirations of these churches. This is readily understandable, not only in the light of the conviction of most of the major European Christian missions that education was the essential handmaiden of evangelism, but in the increasingly evident fact that for the peoples of northern Nyasaland, education was a *sine qua non* for the maintenance of “their privileged positions in labour markets throughout eastern and central Africa.” 10) As Dr. McCracken rightly notes, “Such was the superiority of Livingstonia’s system that up to the First World War this dominance went virtually unchallenged. 11)

For several reasons, this “dominance” was in fact being challenged in the early 1920s. Dr. McCracken notes that this “can be explained partly by the paucity of financial resources provided by the Nyasaland Government and partly by changes within the Livingstonia Mission itself.” 12) For example, in 1920 the total grant-in-aid disbursed by the

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7) See, e.g. below, 117 ff.

8) For a more or less complete list of those churches established throughout Nyasaland during these years, see Zomba: Miss. 12/10. This file comprises a History of Native Controlled Missions Operating in Nyasaland, compiled in 1940. For a chronological listing of these “missions”, more accurately termed “churches”, see Macdonald, R. J., *A History of African Education in Nyasaland, 1875-1945*, (Ph. D. dissertation, Edinburgh University) 1969, Appendix M, 624-626.

9) For the most thorough analysis of this assumption, see K. J. McCracken’s dissertation previously cited.


11) Ibid.