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FOOD PRODUCTION AND FAMILY LABOUR IN SOUTHERN MALAWI: THE SHIRE HIGHLANDS AND UPPER SHIRE VALLEY IN THE EARLY COLONIAL PERIOD*

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THE MECHANICS of food production by peasant cultivators have probably received insufficient attention from historians of colonial Africa. Some writers have seen the ability of small farmers to feed themselves simply as part of the system whereby wages in the capitalist sector of the colonial economy were kept artificially low.[1] Whilst there is much force in this argument, it is also the case that the ability of potential wage-workers to feed themselves and their families could also be a factor working for their economic autonomy, sometimes enabling them to spurn wage-labour altogether.[2] In the case of Southern Malawi in the early colonial period, the ability or inability of various groups to remain self-sufficient in foodstuffs was a major factor contributing to an economic stratification within the peasantry. An understanding of this is thus fundamental to any analysis of the period and of subsequent historical developments.

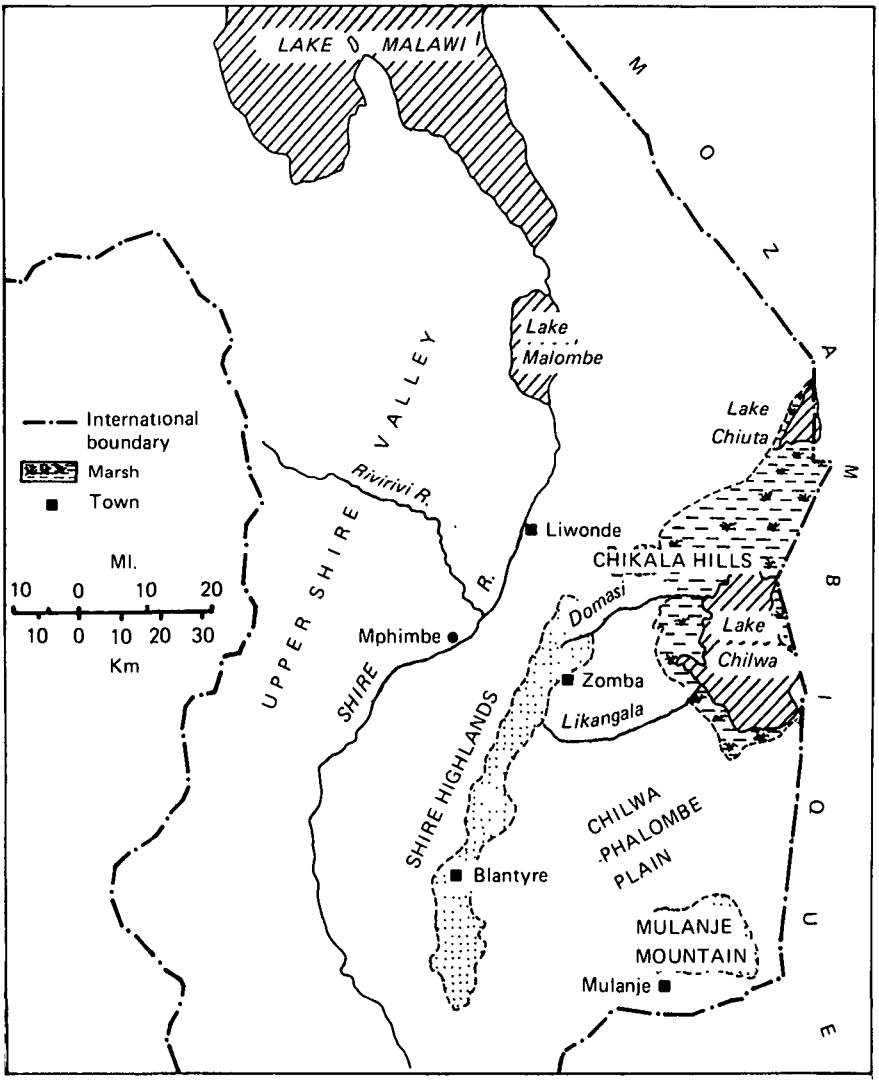
The history of the efforts of cultivating families to remain self-sufficient in food is in part the story of their ability to initiate and sustain purely agricultural changes in the face of new demands on their land and labour. In general, the main constraint on achieving food self-sufficiency was labour availability, though in places this interacted with, and was compounded by, land shortage and a decline in soil fertility. The history of food production in this period thus entails a study of how peasant families calculated the gains or losses of adopting higher-yielding but more labour-intensive crops, and how they calculated the relative costs of the various cash-raising strategies open to them. As John Tosh has pointed out,[3] an understanding of these calculations and of the 'labour profiles' of different food-producing communities is essential to any analysis of why new cash-crops were readily

* This paper was presented to the History Seminar, Chancellor College, University of Malawi, in December 1981. I wish to thank John McCracken, Kings Phiri and Andrew Roberts for their comments on an earlier draft.

[1] David Bettison, 'Factors in the determination of wage rates in Central Africa', *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal*, XXVIII (1960), 26. Bettison is cited in G. Arrighi's influential article 'Labour supplies in historical perspective', *Journal of Development Studies*, VI (1970), 200. This model has been applied extensively to the history of labour supply and wage-rates in Southern Africa. See, for instance, Martin Legassick, 'Gold, Agriculture, and Secondary Industry in South Africa, 1885–1970: From Periphery to Sub-Metropole as a Forced Labour System' p. 181 in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, 1977), and, in the same volume, Colin Bundy, 'The Transkei Peasantry, *c.* 1890–1914: Passing through a Period of Stress', 211.

[2] For a recent discussion of this interpretation see Frederick Cooper, 'Peasants, capitalists and historians: a review article', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, VII, ii (April 1981), 289.

[3] John Tosh, 'The cash-crop revolution in tropical Africa: an agricultural reappraisal', *African Affairs*, LXXIX (1980).



THE SHIRE HIGHLANDS, UPPER SHIRE VALLEY, AND CHILWA BASIN

adopted in some areas but not in others. This is illustrated here through the case of the early colonial cotton industry in the Upper Shire valley. Such an understanding is also essential to the analysis of capitalist agricultural developments and colonial legislation on land and labour, illustrated here through the case of labour policies on the European estates of the Shire Highlands. Central to both these stories must be an understanding of the organization of production in the pre-colonial period which goes beyond a stylized description of different 'modes of production'[4] to describe how

[4] Lionel Cliffe, 'Rural class formation in East Africa', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, IV (1977).

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communities exploited different ecological zones, how much labour was required to attain food security, and what the role of exchange was in their calculations of how to obtain their food requirements.

For most of the eighteenth century the Shire Highlands, Upper Shire valley and Chilwa basin were occupied solely by Nyanja people living on the margins of what had been the Maravi state system, and organized into small, kinship-based political units. These largely autonomous units were bound loosely together by a common cultural tradition expressed through a territorial religious cult, as well as by the economic exchange encouraged by ecological diversity. Agricultural production was household-based and mainly for subsistence, but some industries called for the co-operation of a wider group than the household or the matrilineage of which it was a part, and the division of labour varied somewhat with the specialisms of different groups.[5] Whilst land was in general plentiful, this was a relatively densely populated area by African standards, and good agricultural land was probably associated with a defined sense of group ownership.[6]

One Nyanja group occupied the Upper Shire valley, which is a wide, flat valley running the course of the river from the southern end of Lake Malawi as far as the cataracts near Matope. The climate here is hot and dry, the area lying in a partial rain-shadow. Despite the relatively low rainfall, the Upper Shire was to some extent agriculturally favoured by the fertile alluvial soils found here in patches, as well as by the valuable marshland or *dambos*. In general, however, agriculture here was a risky business, being subject to periodic drought and flooding, and the choice of crops grown and the allocation of labour within communities here aimed at minimizing these risks.

In the early nineteenth century the Nyanja inhabitants of the Upper Shire valley were growing finger millet (*maere*)[7] as their staple food crop, supplemented by sorghum (*mapira*).[8] Both of these crops were well suited to conditions there, due to their relatively low moisture requirements and their ability to withstand drought.[9] The natural vegetation of the Upper Shire valley is grass and shrub, interspersed with patches of *mopane* woodland, and this would imply the early use of the hoe in this area and a variant on a bush-fallow system of agriculture in which the grass needs to be cleared with a hoe before planting can take place. This was certainly the kind of agriculture practised here in the mid-nineteenth century when Livingstone observed Nyanja husbandry and contrasted their 'woodland' and 'grassland' agricultural systems. In the latter the grass was stacked, the ground hoed, and the stacks burnt before the land was planted with a variety of crops – sorghum, millet, groundnuts, yams, rice, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, cassava and

[5] There is a problem here in discerning how far the matrilineage, or the sorority group (*mbumba*) within it, were units of production. This is almost impossible to determine historically. Oral testimony tends to emphasize the importance of the 'household' as a unit of production, whilst the 'ideology of kinship' centres on the unit of the territorial clan. The matrilineage and sorority group are almost invisible in oral testimony.

[6] As evidenced in the case of an intra-Nyanja dispute over land bordering Lake Chilwa in the late eighteenth century.

[7] *Eleusine coracana*.

[8] *Sorghum vulgare*.

[9] M. P. Miracle, *Maize in Tropical Africa* (Madison, 1966), 208; B. F. Johnston, *The Staple Food Economies of Western Tropical Africa* (Stanford, 1963), 91–3.

hemp.[10] Maize is also mentioned by Livingstone and, though not the staple crop, had probably been known and grown by the Nyanja of the Upper Shire for some time. They grew it in small quantities all year round, exploiting the riverside *dambos* for this purpose. River-sand was placed on top of the waterlogged *dambo* mud and maize planted in it, allowing the roots to take what moisture the plant required from the clay below, without becoming saturated.[11] In addition Livingstone described how, in the dry season, maize was grown by making holes in a sandy depression through which a perennial stream flowed, and sowing the maize in the bottom of these holes. As well as growing a wide variety of food crops, the people here also cultivated patches of cotton, one variety of which was a hardy perennial bush, and wove the product into cloth, which became an important article of exchange.

What evidence we possess thus leads towards a picture of comparatively intensive agricultural exploitation in the Upper Shire valley. The investment of labour in dry-season gardens was a risk-averting strategy in an area where drought was a frequent occurrence. Similarly, the deployment of male labour in fishing and cloth-making was done in the knowledge that in a bad year food could usually be obtained from the highlands in exchange for these products, as well as iron goods which were manufactured on the highlands.

The Nyanja of the highlands pursued similar economic activities to those in the valley. They were primarily agriculturalists, but were also part-time fishermen, hunters and salt-makers. However, the different environment in which they lived gave rise to some divergencies. Drought was less common here and so the amount of labour required to ensure subsistence would have been less than in the valley. However, this area lay on important trade routes to the east coast, and as the caravan trade increased in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, so the Nyanja of the highlands became accustomed to producing a surplus of foodstuffs to sell to the traders, as well as bartering iron-goods, tobacco and beeswax.

The evolution of the agricultural system of the Nyanja of the highlands can be deduced from what we know of the natural environment of this area, as well as from the evidence of travellers and oral testimony relating to the nineteenth century. The climate on the highlands is cooler and the rainfall both higher and more reliable than in the valley. The soils, however, are predominantly the red and yellow-red soils common to this part of Africa, and marked by *brachystegia* woodland. There are patches of more fertile yellow sandy clays, and alluvial soils occurring at the heads of the highland *dambos*, but in general the Shire Highland Nyanja were cultivating on fairly poor soils covered with dense woodland. Given this natural environment it seems likely that at one time the Nyanja there had practised 'shifting cultivation', perhaps to a larger extent than their kin in the Shire valley. Natural grass cover is limited in *brachystegia* woodland, unlike in the river valley where it is widespread. Assuming no population pressure, it would seem likely that a system of forest-fallow cultivation would once have been practised here to ensure high yields in infertile soils. This system of cultivation requires an initial heavy labour input as large trees need to be felled with an axe or burnt, but subsequently requires much less labour than a bush-fallow system of

[10] David and Charles Livingstone, *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambezi and its Tributaries, and the Discovery of Lakes Chirwa and Nyasa, 1858–64* (London, 1865), 110.
[11] *Ibid.* 457.

agriculture as seeds are planted directly into the ashes without further land preparation and without the need for any tool except possibly a digging stick. It also implies a relatively high degree of mobility as, if high yields are to be maintained, new plots should be prepared each year. That this system of agriculture was once employed can only be conjectured, since all oral and written sources on agricultural techniques refer to a period in the nineteenth century when more intensive land use had already become common. Although it is difficult to say anything conclusive about pre-colonial population densities, there is some evidence to suppose that, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, population density on the Shire Highlands was such as to have forced cultivators into a more labour-intensive system of bush-fallow cultivation, requiring the use of the hoe and the cultivation of dry-season gardens. Ester Boserup contends that peasant cultivators do not employ bush-fallow systems of agriculture unless forced to do so by the unavailability of forest.[12] This is because they are aware that the labour input required to produce the same output is much greater for bush-fallow cultivation than for forest-fallow. Assuming this to be the case, the fact that the Nyanja were exporting hoes and other ironware by the beginning of the nineteenth century is of some significance, as it implies that the cultivators of the highlands (where the ore was found) had been using the hoe for some time.

If this description of nineteenth-century Nyanja agricultural practices is correct, then it would lend weight to Livingstone's fond description of Nyanja agriculture as a pursuit involving all members of the 'family':

> All the people of a village turn out to labour in the fields. It is no uncommon thing to see men, women and children hard at work, with the baby lying close by beneath a shady bush.[13]

Nyanja agriculture was indeed relatively labour-intensive and would have required a substantial work input from all members of the household over a considerable part of the year.

Exchange of craft products and of foodstuffs was central to the economy of the area and to the calculations of individual households. Production of a surplus for sale became more important as the nineteenth century wore on, when the presence of long-distance traders in the area provided increased opportunities for barter and for the acquisition of exotic goods. Local exchange between the Nyanja of the highlands and those of the valley centred on the barter of foodstuffs and iron-goods from the highlands, for cotton cloth, salt and fish from the valley. There was also a lively trade with the inhabitants of the Chilwa basin, an area where, because of low rainfall and poor soils, agriculture was a particularly hazardous business. The people of Lake Chilwa thus relied on trading their fish, and the high-quality salt they produced, for foodstuffs from other areas.

Once we take into account the amount of labour required to produce these essential non-agricultural products for exchange, it is difficult to see how the 'vent-for-surplus' model, used more or less explicitly by some writers on African economic history, could be applied to this area.[14] The sexual

[12] Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth – the Economics of Agrarian Change under Population Pressure* (London, 1965), 31.

[13] Livingstone, *Narrative*, 110.

[14] For instance, Gavin Kitching, *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite Bourgeoisie* (New Haven, 1980), 14–20.

division of labour varied from place to place, but in no case is it possible to discern a vast surplus of 'idle' male labour awaiting productive employment.

Control over production rarely extended beyond the matrilineage. There is no evidence for the regular giving of tribute to Nyanja chiefs, although this had apparently been a feature of the Maravi state system prior to its decline. In part, this decentralization of production was due to 'natural' factors. Iron ore, for instance, was widely scattered in small deposits over the highlands, and the skill of iron-making was widely diffused, so that almost every village had its own kiln. Only in the case of the fishing industry of Lake Chilwa is there evidence of significant chiefly control over an important industry.[15] Similarly, the organization of exchange, except in the case of the ivory trade, would appear to have been highly decentralized. Oral testimony describes local and regional trade in terms of gift-giving between kin, and the evidence of marriage patterns, for instance between the Nyanja of the highlands and those of the Chilwa basin, would tend to endorse this.

This picture was to change from the 1860s onwards with the establishment of political authority over part of the area by the Mbewe Yao chiefs.[16] The Yao had long been known in the area as traders, and from the 1790s had been migrating into the area in small groups. It was only with the coming of the Mbewe Yao chiefs, however, that far-reaching changes in economic and political structures came about. The Mbewe Yao were more aggressive than the earlier Yao immigrants in their attempts to control the long-distance trade-routes in the area, and to establish the kind of political authority which would further this aim. They possessed superior firearms and were involved in conflicts with other Yao groups, Ngoni immigrants from the south, and their Nyanja 'subjects'. As the slave trade increased in importance towards the end of the century, so these conflicts were intensified. Oral testimony emphasizes that a crucial feature of Yao culture was male disdain for agricultural activities. With men absent for unpredictably long periods, it would appear that the sexual division of labour in Yao society had evolved somewhat differently to that among the Nyanja, with the women taking a greater responsibility for food production. Whilst the Nyanja had been involved in servicing long-distance traders through their barter of foodstuffs and craft products, the Yao were at the hub of the trade as middlemen, and thus their ability to acquire coastal cloth, firearms and other exotic goods was not dependent on their ability to produce a surplus within their domestic economy. This external economic orientation had increased their vulnerability to natural disaster and famine, and famine in their homeland is given as one of the major factors precipitating their migration westwards.[17] Certainly the

[15] Oral testimonies: no. 5, with Malindima Muluta, Kabango village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba District, 2/2/78; no. 8, with Forster Nazinomwe, Nazinomwe village, T.A. Kuntumanje, Zomba District, 10/2/78; no. 16, with Adira Saiti, Kapichi village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba District, 19/5/78; no. 22, with Whiskers Chilamwa, Mbando village, T.A. Mposa, Machinga District, 26/5/78; no. 23, with Barton Masonga, Simeon village, T.A. Malemia, Zomba District, 27/5/78.

[16] Megan Vaughan, 'Social and economic change in Southern Malawi: a study of rural communities in the Shire Highlands and Upper Shire valley from the mid-nineteenth century to 1915', Ph.D. thesis, London, 1981, 71–81.

[17] Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 70; J. B. Webster, 'From Yao Hill to Mount Mulanje: Ivory and Slaves and the Southern Expansion of the Yao', University of Malawi, Chancellor College, Department of History, seminar paper, November 1977.

Yao were familiar with Nyanja country from their trading trips and regarded it as a rich area for both food and slave-raiding. The Yao presence ultimately proved highly disruptive of agricultural production in the area as their dependence on the slave trade increased. Although there is evidence that some Yao chiefs attempted to exact a regular food tribute from their subjects and to organize food production through the distribution of seeds and the storage of famine reserves,[18] the effects of warfare and insecurity more than countered these efforts and made food supply less certain, as well as disrupting the local trade which had been an integral feature of the economy of the area. Settlement patterns were drastically altered. Nyanja people took to the hilltops or led a very marginal and mobile existence on the fringes of Lake Chilwa. Slaves, predominantly women, were herded into stockaded Yao towns, sometimes being assimilated into their owner's lineage and thus returning to productive activities, but often used as an article of exchange with other groups, or taken to the coast for sale. The artificial concentration of population had the added effect of creating vast areas of unsettled grassland on which both locusts and tsetse flies could breed. In many areas cultivators were unable to pursue the combination of dry and wet-land agriculture which had previously provided them some insurance against famine. Livingstone noted in the early 1860s that warfare and insecurity had made impracticable the traditional famine-averting strategy of migration to the river banks in time of drought.[19]

The late nineteenth century was thus a period when cultivators in this area had to adapt their agricultural systems rapidly to new and often adverse circumstances. The long-distance trade networks, which had previously provided them with a market for their surplus produce, now threatened their very existence. Two or more generations of Nyanja people lived on hilltops where they had to adapt their cultivation techniques quickly to the stony soils and crowded conditions. This was probably a period of great agricultural experimentation when a wide variety of crops (including some of those which had reached them along long-distance trade-routes) were tried out for their adaptability to new conditions. For less fortunate communities, however, forced to flee from their homes without even a store of seed, it was simply a period of famine and hardship.

EARLY COLONIAL STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL

European settlers and missionaries began arriving on the Shire Highlands in the 1870s and 1880s, alienating vast areas of apparently uninhabited land. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the British progressively defeated and disarmed the Yao chiefs and undermined the source of their economic power – the slave trade. The 1890s was a decade when peasant cultivators appear to have attempted to return to something like their early-nineteenth-century settlement patterns and productive systems. In the late 1880s and early 1890s Church of Scotland missionaries noted that population was dispersing from the hilltops to the lower slopes, remarking that people were 'tired of hoeing among stones'.[20] A new market for agricultural produce was

[18] Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 77–8.

[19] Livingstone, *Narrative*, 456.

[20] *Life and Work in British Central Africa*, no. 90, August 1895, 7.

provided by the migrant labour from further north which had been recruited to work on the newly opened coffee estates. Further incentives for producing a surplus came from the introduction of hut-tax, and the availability of cloth, salt and other trade goods in European-owned stores. Evidence abounds for the quick response to these opportunities and for the rejection of wage labour in favour of this alternative cash-raising strategy. Some traditional male occupations such as cotton-weaving and iron-making were gradually made obsolete by the spread of imported hoes and cloth, thus increasing dependence on the market as well as releasing extra male labour into agricultural activities. The gradually decreasing need for defensive activities also contributed to supplying more male labour for agriculture. A wide variety of food crops was grown for sale, and some peasants began growing imported vegetable varieties for European consumption. The traditional tobacco-growing industry expanded to meet the demand for cured tobacco amongst migrant workers, and a small group of mission-educated entrepreneurs began growing cash-crops such as coffee, chillies and oranges.[21] Although European estate owners were encouraged to feed their labour, this seems rarely to have happened, and on their days off labourers would work in the gardens of local peasants and be paid in foodstuffs.[22]

This was not a period of unqualified prosperity for the inhabitants of the Shire Highlands, however. First, the ecological imbalances and disturbances of the previous decades continued to exert an influence on production. Locust swarms were a frequent occurrence and in some areas the wild animal population had increased enormously, ruining crops and inhibiting the full redistribution of population. The health and productive capacities of communities were also affected by the presence of new diseases which had accompanied the European invasion.[23] Secondly, the effects of massive land alienation, although not immediately dramatic, did ultimately disallow the natural redistribution of the farming population. This became a crucial factor after the turn of the century when more of this land was put down to cotton and tobacco, and when it was coupled with increasingly effective demands on male labour, as well as with the immigration into the area of large numbers of Lomwe people from Mozambique.

European estate owners had long been concerned about the seasonality and unreliability of migrant labour. After the turn of the century they received the compliance of the Administration in the enforcement of *thangata*, a labour–rent system whereby residents on alienated land were obliged to perform from one to three months' labour for their landlord at the peak agricultural season. One obvious response to this was a movement of peasant families away from the estates on to Crown Land, and there is much evidence of this occurring in the early 1900s. By introducing a differential taxation system in 1901, however, the Administration ensured that merely moving on to Crown Land was not a foolproof escape from wage labour. The

[21] Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 157–60. This group is also documented by S. S. Myambo, 'The Shire Highlands plantations: a socio-economic history of the plantation system of production in Malawi, 1891–1938', M.A. thesis, University of Malawi, 1973.

[22] *Central African Times* III, vii (11 Nov. 1899), 4.

[23] There were frequent outbreaks of measles in this period, as well as epidemics of a virulent strain of smallpox which was new to the area.

effects of these policies on the available manpower for peasant food production, and on the division of labour in these communities, were not immediately dramatic and were not felt equally by all sections of the population. While it is probably true that the majority of adult males performed at least one month's wage labour in order to secure a labour certificate, there is also evidence for a lively trade in labour certificates on the Shire Highlands, implying that at least some families were able to buy themselves out of wage labour altogether.[24] There was also a marked preference for porterage work as opposed to agricultural wage labour, as the former could be performed in the dry season, and thus did not interfere so much with food production. The continuing evidence for the sale of peasant produce in this period, and the establishment of urban markets for this purpose, also indicates that some sections of the population continued to produce a surplus. By 1915, however, the evidence for recurrent minor famines on the Shire Highlands runs side by side with the evidence for the survival of a surplus-producing section of the peasantry, and forces us to look more closely at the differential impact of land and labour policies in this period.[25]

By 1915 the Lomwe immigration, combined with the expansion of European cotton and tobacco production, had given rise to a degree of pressure on the best land.[26] Peasant food producers resident on Crown Land could cope with this land pressure as long as they retained a reasonable amount of control over their family labour, and did not become dependent on wage labour for more than paying taxes. It was in this period that this section of the peasantry began growing increasing amounts of maize at the expense of the older staples, millet and sorghum. Maize had been known and grown in small quantities for at least a century but, because of its higher productivity per acre and greater potential for genetic variability, it now became the major crop on the highlands. The drawbacks to dependence on maize were that it was more vulnerable to drought than the older staples, and more labour-intensive to produce.[27] So long as the necessary labour was available, however, peasant cultivators seem to have calculated that it was worth growing, despite the fact that the switch also involved considerable changes in the technology of storage and food processing.[28] It was those households in which both male and female labour could continue to be deployed on food production which were able to initiate such agricultural changes and continue to produce for the market.

Constituting a major section of the market for these foodstuffs were the tenants on estates, a group which, as time went on, could be increasingly

[24] Public Record Office, London: C.O. 525/12. Enclosure in Sharpe to C.O., March 1906.

[25] Serious food shortages occurred in 1900, 1902, 1905, 1911 and 1912. Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 181–4.

[26] The adoption of tobacco and cotton as the main crops grown on the estates was highly significant. Tobacco, in particular, is a land-extensive crop, requiring a long soil rotation. The early estate owners cleared new land for planting every year, and were anxious to keep their tenants off the fallow land.

[27] J. D. Acland, *East African Crops*, F.A.O. (London, 1971), 124.

[28] While millet was traditionally smoked and stored in the hut, maize was stored in a separate grain-bin and needed to be protected against pests. The method of preparation was different; the grains were pounded and sifted whereas those of millet were threshed, winnowed and ground between stones.

identified with Lomwe immigrants. The first Lomwe immigrants had been welcomed on to Crown Land by the Nyanja, with whom they quickly established kinship ties based on free and semi-servile marriages. As land availability decreased, however, the later immigrants were forced to reside on estates as tenants. On most estates the tenants' access to land for cultivation was extremely limited, though labour demands differed considerably from one estate to another. On the worst women as well as men were obliged to perform *thangata* for unpredictably long periods, and the treatment of labour was harsh. While the possibility of mobility remained, families exercised this freedom by moving from estate to estate in search of better conditions. In general, however, the tenantry's limited control over their family labour led them to adopt a different food-producing strategy to that of the peasantry on Crown Land. It was a more desperate and less successful one. Millet and sorghum were unsuited to a situation of land shortage, and maize required a heavy labour input. Consequently, tenant families became more reliant on the cultivation of cassava and the buying of foodstuffs on the market. To some extent the Lomwe can be said to have brought with them the means of their survival, for they are widely credited with the introduction of a new, fast-maturing cassava variety. Cassava had the advantages of requiring little labour to grow, of surviving in poor soils and with poor rainfall, of storing in the ground from season to season, and of yielding a high calorific value per acre. It was, however, deficient in proteins and vitamins, and an increasing reliance on this crop implied a decrease in nutritional standards and a greater vulnerability to disease.[29] On Crown Land peasants grew cassava in combination with maize as an insurance against the failure of the main crop, but tenant families were in general unable to pursue a similar strategy. They increasingly relied on buying maize from the peasants on Crown Land and were thus highly vulnerable to price increases. It was this section of the population which suffered when locust swarms or drought precipitated food shortages on the highlands, or when the Administration inhibited the movement of food from one area to another.[30] Whilst wages remained virtually constant and very low, the price of food could easily double or treble in a season. The evidence for famine on the Shire Highlands therefore is not so much evidence for an overall decline in food production there, but for the vulnerable nature of the 'food entitlement' of this tenant group.[31]

To sum up, the early colonial period on the Shire Highlands was a time when peasant cultivators needed once more to show initiative and flexibility if they were to remain self-sufficent in food. Control over family labour was the most important variable at work here. Those who were able to maintain this control were also able to adopt new crops and farming systems to ensure

[29] Acland, *East African Crops*, 33–7; Miracle, *Maize in Tropical Africa*, 10.

[30] The Natives Foodstuffs Ordinance was passed in 1912 with a view to preventing exploitation of the food shortage by European and Indian traders. The overall effect of this measure, however, was to make food even more expensive in areas where the crop had failed.

[31] 'Famine is a characteristic of some people not *having* food; it is not a characteristic of there not *being* enough food. While the latter *can* be a cause of the former, it is one of many possible causes, and indeed *may or may not* be associated with famines' (italics in original). Amartya Sen, 'Famines', *World Development*, VIII, ix (September 1980), 614.

their food supply and to enable them to continue to remain independent of wage labour. A disproportionate amount of labour amongst this group fell on female shoulders, partly because adult males in most households had to perform at least one month's wage labour in the peak season, and partly because new conservation measures made female duties such as the collection of firewood more onerous. Nevertheless, it was the ability or inability of peasant households to keep their male labour on their farms which largely determined their economic status. The evidence seems to point to the fact that, where sufficient labour was available, peasant farmers could by a careful choice (and breeding)[32] of crops, and by flexibility in technology, adapt to and survive considerable restrictions on their access to land.

FOOD PRODUCTION AND THE FAILURE OF THE COTTON INDUSTRY

Land shortage was not an important factor influencing peasant farming decisions in the Upper Shire Valley. The British Central Africa Company had alienated large areas of land here,[33] but only a small proportion of it was exploited, and there is no evidence that 'squatters' were moved off this land in the early period. To be sure, some tenants were called upon to perform *thangata*, and others were obliged to grow cotton under a share-cropping system for sale to the company.[34] In general, however, there was much more land available here for food production than there was on the highlands. One consequence of this was that farming systems did not have to undergo any rapid change. Long-fallow systems of cultivation survived here into the 1930s.[35] Maize did not replace millet and sorghum here because it was less suited to the drier climate of the valley and because the relatively free access to land enjoyed by peasants here made its higher productivity per acre less significant. Similarly, the allocation of labour within households not directly affected by the B.C.A. Company remained broadly similar to that of the pre-colonial period, except that adult males were obliged to perform one month's wage labour for tax, and could be called upon to provide labour for 'public works' such as road-building.

It was in this area, from 1903, that the colonial administration sought to introduce cotton as a peasant cash-crop.[36] Their efforts were largely unsuccessful, and the reasons behind this failure had much to do with food production. This point is best illustrated by a quote from an informant in the Upper Shire Valley:

On the day that cotton seed was distributed for the first time here, the chief Hindahinda had just returned with a less than half-filled bag of maize from *msuma* – a sojourn for food whereby you work in the gardens of those who have food, for food... As a result Hindahinda was very frustrated when Whicker (the District

[32] Very little is known about the ways in which peasant farmers respond to changing conditions by breeding certain characteristics into their crops, though it is clear that such selection does take place.

[33] The British Central Africa Company held over 200,000 acres of land in this area, most of it taken over from Eugene Sharrer who had 'claimed' it in the 1880s.

[34] Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 234–40.

[35] Upper Shire District Notebook (National Archives of Malawi), I, 134.

[36] Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 243–51.

Collector) gave him cotton seed on his return from *msuma*. He said he wanted food, not cotton seed, and burnt the seed which he had been given to distribute to his people...[37]

As indicated in the quotation, the early years of the twentieth century was a time when food supply was far from secure in the Upper Shire Valley. The warfare and ecological disturbance of the last part of the nineteenth century had taken their toll here, and people were only beginning to move back on to lower land to re-establish their agricultural systems under very different economic and political circumstances. Some of the people who moved into the valley at this time were Ngoni from the central highlands of Ntcheu, who had to make radical adjustments to their slave-raiding, cattle-keeping economy. As was noted above, the attainment of food security in this area which was prone to drought involved the deployment of family labour on food production over much of the year; the planting of second crops if the rains failed, and the cultivation of dry-season gardens and back-up crops on the river banks. Little attention was paid to these considerations when cotton was introduced as a cash-crop here.

The introduction of cotton owed most to pressures on the Nyasaland administration from the British Cotton Growing Association, coupled with the concern of individual district officers to raise local tax revenue in their areas. The European settlers complied with this development as long as it took place away from the major European cotton-growing areas, and as long as they could be involved in the lucrative businesses of processing and marketing the peasant crop. There were, however, numerous drawbacks to the cultivation of cotton for peasant households, and numerous constraints on the development of the industry. As with all export crops, the bewildering fluctuations of the world market could lead to wide variations in the price obtained by the sellers. Believing that it was better to protect the peasant from these fluctuations, the Nyasaland administration initially adopted a policy of keeping the price paid to peasants constant and low, despite the fact that the Nyasaland crop was of a very high quality and sometimes obtained record prices on the world market.[38] Any surplus was creamed off by the large European companies who were designated official cotton buyers. European growers of cotton had early on recognized that the crop was not profitable to grow unless it could be processed prior to export, thus reducing the very heavy transport costs. Despite a brief experiment with hand-gins, the peasant growers were never able to control the marketing or processing of their crop, and were thus not able to obtain an economic price for it. Added to this was the fact that very little prior investigation had been made into the suitability of the different cotton varieties introduced, and the problem of pests. In some years the seed failed to germinate altogether, and in other years the entire

[37] Oral Testimony no. 54, with Maria Hindahinda, Hindahinda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga district, 5 Jan. 1979.

[38] The price paid to the farmer was between three-quarters of a penny and one penny per pound depending on the distance that the cotton had to be transported for ginning, and also on the quality of the cotton. In 1910 some of the Nyasaland African-grown crop obtained the record price of one shilling and one penny per pound on the world market. Nyasaland Protectorate, Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 31 Mar. 1910, 5.

crop was destroyed by insects or disease.[39] Perhaps the crucial factor, however, was that cotton was a labour-intensive crop which had to be grown on roughly the same cycle as the staple food crop.[40] District officers complained that peasants planted their food crops first and only then turned to their cotton gardens, and thus yields were not as high as they would have been if the crop had been planted earlier. They made simplistic and inaccurate assumptions about the nature of food production in the area. Food production, they said, was the work of women, and so there could be no problem in finding the labour to grow cotton – cotton was to be a crop to keep the 'idle' men gainfully employed. Indeed, men had grown cotton in this area in the nineteenth century, but the cultivation of a hardy perennial bush was very different to growing and preparing for sale an exotic and unpredictable annual.

The price paid to the peasants for their cotton never fully compensated them for the loss of labour which would otherwise have gone into ensuring food security or into fishing, and the industry was dealt a final death-blow by marketing problems during the First World War. One informant claimed that people stopped growing cotton soon after the First World War because there was a rise in taxes 'and people realized that cotton had been introduced so that people should be able to get tax money'[41] – a perceptive observation given that this was how local administrators did view the African cotton industry. Henceforth families fulfilled their tax obligations in other ways. One popular form of employment was head porterage, as it could be performed in the dry season and in a couple of weeks the tax could be raised. Others sold charcoal to the steamers on the river, or marketed their fish. Some men migrated to Rhodesia or South Africa for more profitable employment. By the 1930s this area was a major groundnut-producing region, which indicates that there was no resistance to cash-crop production in itself, as long as the labour requirements of the crop were not too onerous, or were compensated by a sufficiently high price. In a famine year the groundnut crop could be eaten if it had survived, but cotton was useless to the starving unless it could pay for their food requirements.

Crucial to an understanding of peasant economies in the colonial period is a knowledge of food production systems and the labour they involved. The first priority of peasant farmers was, and is, the attainment of food security. In the early colonial period in Southern Malawi, ecological disturbance and the alienation of land meant that an increasing amount of family labour needed to be deployed on food production if hunger were to be avoided. The differential success of groups in holding on to their family labour for this purpose was a major factor making for economic differentiation in this period.

[39] In 1914 the Assistant Agriculturalist of South Nyasa district reported that up to eighty per cent of the crop in his area had been destroyed by field mice. Nyasaland Protectorate, Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture and Forestry, 31 Mar. 1915, 23.

[40] Cotton was planted in November or December, at the same time as labour was required to plant millet, sorghum and maize. It required a great deal of weeding during its growth, as well as a heavy labour input when it was picked and sorted in April or May.

[41] Oral Testimony no. 53, Village Headman Hindahinda, Hindahinda village, T.A. Kalembo, Machinga District, 5 Jan. 1979.

In the Upper Shire valley the concern for food security led to the rejection of a cash-crop the returns on which did not compensate for the loss of labour on food crops. On the Shire Highlands peasant farming systems were well able to adapt to a degree of land shortage as long as labour could be intensified on the land available.

SUMMARY

The mechanics of food production by peasant cultivators have received relatively little attention from historians of colonial Africa, and yet a knowledge of food production systems and the labour they require is crucial to any understanding of rural change and stratification in the colonial period. On the Shire Highlands of Southern Malawi, ecological disturbance and the alienation of land in the early years of the twentieth century meant that an intensification of labour on food production was needed if hunger was to be avoided. The differential success of various groups in holding on to their family labour was a major factor making for economic differentiation in this period. Full-scale famine was avoided by the ability of some groups to adopt new cropping patterns, intensify labour, and thus continue to produce a food surplus. A degree of land shortage could be accommodated as long as labour could be intensified on the available land. In the Upper Shire valley at the same time, there was little shortage of land, but the concern for food security there was important in determining the outcome of the introduction of cotton as a cash-crop. The attainment of food security in this area, which was prone to drought, involved the deployment of family labour on food production over much of the year, including the planting of second crops and back-up crops in the dry season. The introduction of cotton was largely a failure because the returns did not compensate for the loss of labour on food production.