Food Systems under Stress in Africa

African–Canadian Research Cooperation

Proceedings of a Workshop held in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
7–8 November 1993

Edited by
Ronnie Vernooij and Katherine M. Kealey
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The 1992 Famine in Malawi: Why History Matters

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Abstract Food insecurity has long been a problem for peasant societies in Malawi. Throughout precolonal, colonial, and postcolonial times, rural populations have had difficulties meeting their food needs. This paper agrees with previous works in that the colonial era was pivotal in shaping Africa’s past and current economic problems and food crises. It suggests, however, that hunger has resulted more from internal than external forces. Hardly being all-powerful and omnipotent, the colonial state and capitalists lacked the economic basis and political power to create a capitalist mode of production and solve the problem of food insecurity. The majority of the region’s inhabitants thwarted colonial plans and did not want to be "developed" in the sense of becoming wage-labourers on estates. By the 1930s officials came to accept peasant production as a viable development strategy. This shift away from estate agriculture toward smallholder production may have represented a political victory for the populace at large, but it was self-defeating in the long term. By independence in 1964, colonial rule had left an economy that was neither capitalist nor precapitalist but contained elements of both worlds. The postcolonial state, therefore, was left with the task of transforming peasants into wage-labourers. Like their colonial predecessors, however, Malawian administrators were unable to effect a complete transformation in this area. With a large percentage of Malawians continuing to eke out impoverished existences as peasants in 1992, famine was inevitable in the face of intensive drought.

In the last two decades, a plethora of works have explored the causes, consequences, and possible remedies of famine in Africa. Some authors, influenced by dependency theory (Blomstrom and Hettne 1984) have explained past and current famines as the result of colonialism and the extraction of wealth from Africa by foreign capitalists (Warnock 1987). Many of these same authors have offered policy suggestions that involve a retreat from the global economy and a revival of precolonial forms of social organization and production.

The emphasis of policymakers, they suggest, should be on "reconstructing" African communities, because traditional societies had achieved a state of food security before the arrival of Europeans and the external introduction of markets (Rau 1991). Julius Nyerere’s policy of Ujamaa socialism was but one manifestation of this school of thought, which was put into practice in the wake of African independence in the 1960s (Nyerere 1968).

The following account challenges the foregoing interpretation. Tracing the origins of the 1992 famine in Malawi, it is shown that food insecurity has long been a problem for peasant societies. Throughout precolonal, colonial, and postcolonial times, rural populations have had difficulties meeting their food needs. This paper agrees that the colonial era was pivotal in shaping Africa’s past and current economy and food problems, but suggests that hunger has resulted more from internal than external forces. Indeed, hardly being all-powerful and omnipotent, the colonial state and capitalists lacked the economic basis and political power to create a capitalist mode of production and thus solve the problem of food insecurity. Simply put, the majority of Nyasaland’s (as Malawi was known in colonial times) inhabitants resisted colonial plans and did not want to be "developed" in the sense of becoming wage-labourers on estates.
The colonial state’s weakness was turned into a virtue by the 1930s, when officials came to accept peasant production as a viable development strategy. This shift away from estate agriculture toward smallholder production may have represented a political victory for the populace at large, but it was self-defeating in the long term. By the time of independence in 1964, colonial rule had left an economy that was neither capitalist nor precapitalist but contained elements of both worlds. The postcolonial state, therefore, was left with the task of transforming large numbers of peasants into wage-labourers. Like their colonial predecessors, however, Malawian administrators were unable to effect a complete transformation in this area. With a large percentage of Malawians continuing to eke out impoverished existences as peasants in 1992, famine was inevitable in the face of intensive drought.

Preccolonial Period to circa 1830s

The archaeological and historical record is sketchy, but a few brief comments can be offered on the issue of food production and acquisition in Malawi before the 1830s. What evidence we have suggests that the first inhabitants of the Lake Malawi region were a small pygmyoid race of people who practiced a hunting and gathering mode of existence (Pachai 1973, p. 1). The oldest known remains of their settlements, uncovered in the northern district of Karonga, date back to between 50,000 and 100,000 years ago (Clark 1970, pp. 340–411). Known in oral traditions as the Batwa, Kafula, or Akapinji, Malawi’s first inhabitants and their way of life were gradually displaced after the 2nd or 3rd century A.D. by the so-called Bantu peoples, many of whom were the area’s first agriculturalists, pastoralists, and workers of iron (Mgomezulu 1978–79, pp. 9–12, 1981, pp. 450–451). It appears that Bantu dominance and the widespread use of agriculture and iron tools was complete by the 16th century, although stone age technologies and hunting and gathering continued to be practiced into the early colonial period (Johnston 1897, p. 426; Kalinga 1985, p. 29).

On the question of how effective early precolonial survival techniques were for staving off the effects of hunger and famine, it is only possible to speculate. Nonetheless, it would be wise to refrain from characterizing these societies as living in a state of perpetual bliss where food crises were unknown.

Internecine strife, for example, was no stranger to this period (Rangeley 1963, pp. 39–40), nor were the negative effects such violence had upon food availability and distribution (Gamitto 1960, p. 80). As well, the highest form of food-producing technology was the hoe, an inefficient instrument in comparison to the ox-drawn plow, which did not become available until the colonial period. In Kasungu District the plow did not come into use until the 1950s (Chinthayo Banda 1981–82, p. 15).

Moreover, it is unlikely that the famine relief measures implemented by various Maravi chiefs were a universal phenomenon and at all times effective. (This seems to be Langworthy’s implicit contention) (Langworthy 1972, p. 117). Indeed, regional food relief efforts were hampered by a primitive transportation system where roads and river transport were unknown and ill-trodden foot paths and human porterage the norm (Cole-King n.d., p. 76). That early precolonial survival strategies were not infallible can also be gathered by the existence of oral traditions mentioning
a horrific famine that probably occurred sometime in the 17th century (dos Santos 1899, pp. 1–28; Alpers 1969, pp. 21–22; Ransford 1969, p. 17) and large-scale population movements due to drought during the 18th century (Nkhoma 1978, p. 7; Gwereweta Mkandawire n.d., pp. 11–12).

**Precolonial Period, circa 1830s–1891**

In a separate paper I have argued that the period from c. 1830s to 1891 witnessed a rise in the incidence of hunger and famine because of the creation of a slave mode of production (Nault 1993). This marked shift in the economic history of precolonial Malawi occurred for several reasons.

Of major importance were the migrations of the war-like Yao and Ngoni peoples, who originated from Mozambique and Natal, respectively (Rennie 1965, pp. 302–305; Vaughan 1981, pp. 63–64). At the same time the Yao and Ngoni established themselves by the end of the 1830s, crucial transformations were occurring in the world economy. Following a British naval blockade in West Africa in the early 19th century, slave merchants turned in larger numbers to slave-trading entrepots in Eastern Africa (Jhala 1982, p. 6). Also during the early 19th century, further emphasis on the production of cloves, grain, sugar, gum copal, ivory, and other articles of "legitimate commerce" on the East African coast, and the islands of Mauritius, Reunion, and Zanzibar, created a voracious demand for slave labourers in those areas (Gann 1954, p. 10; Sheriff 1987, p. 2).

After supplies of slaves began diminishing to the east of Lake Malawi and south of the Zambesi River, slave merchants sought out new sources of slave labour inland. By the 1820s and 30s, perhaps only 2,000 or 3,000 slaves were taken out of Malawi, usually through nonviolent means such as trade (Nault 1993, p. 6). It appears, however, that during a period of drought between 1861 and 1863, slave merchants, relying mainly upon the Yao as suppliers, expanded the slave trade into the region at an unprecedented pace (Nault 1993, p. 7–9).

Missionary records indicate that violent slave raids and general warfare at the time of the drought contributed to devastating famines in 1861–62 and 1862–63 (Nault 1993, p. 7–9). One missionary wrote in 1863 that the situation was so desperate that inhabitants were "literally living in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and the Shire [River] is truly the River of Death" (Rhodes House Library, Oxford, A1(II), Rowley to his brother, 24 January 1863). David Livingstone attributed both famines in the Shire Valley to Portuguese merchants from Mozambique and their African underlings, because "no previous drought ever brought off the entire population" (National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Manuscript 20314, Livingstone to Admiral Baldwin Walker, 13 July 1863).

Following the famines of the early 1860s, slavery and hunger became a regular feature of the Lake Malawi region. In 1866 Livingstone expressed great concern that the "process of depopulation" was continuing unabated. He attributed the problem to the "coast Arabs from Kilwa" who would pay cloth and ammunition to the Yao and "say they want slaves." Raiding parties would immediately set off for Nyanja and Mang'anja villages, claimed Livingstone, and "bring back the chief portion of the inhabitants; those who escape usually die of starvation" (Public Records Office,
London, FO84/1265, Livingstone to Clarendon, 20 August 1866). The Ngoni, who at first largely raided for slaves to enlarge their military power and population base of their communities, also began raiding and selling slaves for profit (Oral Tradition: John Lufeyo, Mzimba District, T.A. Mbelwa, 10/6/92; John Mwenefumbo, Karonga District, T.A. Kyungu, 6/6/92; Chief Chulu, Kasungu District, T.A. Chulu, 8/6/92).

It is possible that the numbers of slaves shipped out of Malawi each year between the 1860s and late 1880s was somewhere in the vicinity of 15,000 (Nault 1993, p. 13). On a more human level, the violence associated with the slave trade provoked food crises by forcing victimized tribes to abandon fertile farming land, eke out a meagre existence on wild fruits and roots, and crowd into disease-ridden blockaded settlements. Those unfortunate enough to be captured in raids were forced to march hundreds of miles to slave ports in Tanzania or Mozambique with little, if any, food with the result that hundreds perished en route (Nault 1993, p. 16–26).

**Early Colonial Period, 1891–1914**

Although British claims to Nyasaland were affirmed with the creation of a protectorate in 1891, the colonial state still faced the daunting task of establishing political control. Nonetheless, Harry Johnston, the country's first Commissioner, proceeded with great zeal, engaging in numerous expeditions to quell the slave trade. Although all of the expeditions against slavers are too numerous to mention, the most important were those against Kawinga (1891, 1895), Mponda (1891, 1894), Zarafi (1892, 1895), Mitoshe (1893), Makanjira (1893, 1895), Matapwiri (1895), Mlozi (1895), Chikusi (1896), and Mwase Kasungu (1896).

If it is possible to criticize colonial intervention as ethically reprehensible, it still must be conceded that the colonial presence from a strictly materialist standpoint was beneficial in this instance. (This was the general consensus not only of colonialists, but also of Malawian informants. Oral Tradition: Frank Wilson Tonde, Chiradzulu District, T.A. Mpama, 14/9/92; Joseph Namathiwa, Nkhotakota District, T.A. Jere, 11/7/92; I. Nyondo, Chitipa District, T.A. Mwabulambya, 15/6/92.) Indeed, groups such as the Tonga, Mang'anja, Ngonde, Nyanja, and Chewa actively sought out British protection so they could cultivate their gardens without harassment.

As early as two years before the official establishment of colonial rule, the British presence near Zomba had "largely contributed toward averting hunger and famine, which would have inevitably followed had the people not been able to cultivate their gardens" (Public Records Office, London, F084/338, Buchanan to Foreign Office, 23 December 1889). Rather than creating an artificial situation of land shortage, as has often been argued (Mpakati 1973, p. 34), the colonial presence in effect freed up more land for cultivation.

In 1896, following the defeat of Kawinga, large numbers of Africans, formerly harassed by the Yao chief, were observed resettling on the East Bank of the Shire River (Public Records Office, London, FO2/107, Sharpe to Foreign Office, 9 September 1896). Similarly, by 1910, Africans of all tribes were dispersing "wherever they can find suitable land, and...can be found chiefly keeping to the fertile river banks where water and fuel and suitable land for the grain fields exist" (Public Records Office, London, C0525/48, Pearce to Colonial Office, 19 April 1913).
In addition to freeing up more land for cultivation, the political stability provided by the colonial state and an official development strategy emphasizing settler-estate agriculture permitted advancements in the direction of capitalist development. As estate agriculture began the production of coffee, cotton, tea, and tobacco, among other products, a demand for wage labourers arose in all sectors in the economy. Thousands of Lomwe migrated into Nyasaland from Mozambique to escape harsh Portuguese rule, acquire land, and work on European estates (Galligan 1975, pp. 108–123).

With the protectorate lacking lorries, trains, horses, and other forms of transport, employers hired on hundreds of Africans as human carriers to transport local products to areas of export or carry imported products to select destinations (Duff 1903, p. 354). In addition to porterage employment, Africans soon worked in increasing numbers as "carpenters, masons, brickmakers and bricklayers" (Public Records Office, London, F02/746, Handbook on Nyasaland. Enclosure in Sharpe to Foreign Office, 17 January 1903). (Inspired by higher wages outside Nyasaland, thousands of Nyasas, mainly Tonga from the ladeshore, flocked to the mines and estates of Southern Rhodesia and South Africa (McCracken 1977, p. 115).

The mere existence of forms of wage labour in Nyasaland, however, did not indicate that the protectorate had become transformed into a capitalist economy. One of the major impediments to the proletarianization of the work force was the widespread availability of land.

Indeed, planters throughout this period complained of labour shortages, primarily in the wet season, when "natives" were busy cultivating their food plots (Public Records Office, London, F02/746, Sharpe to Foreign Office, 26 January 1903). The first season of acute shortages occurred in 1898–99, but in 1900–01 the situation became so grave that several plantations were forced to cease operations (National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Manuscript 7906/171, Alexander Hetherwick, letter to editor of unspecified newspaper, undated).

By 1908, the labour issue had still not been resolved, with the result that one planter complained that "half of the failures in planting have been due to want of labour." He added that "if one-tenth of the able-bodied men of the protectorate would offer themselves for labour during the wet season they would find ready employment and there would be ample work for the remainder during the dry season" (Central African Times, 20 June 1908).

With the colonial state lacking the military might, finances, and moral authority to transform the precapitalist societies it encountered by compelling labour, the economy could not advance into a more mature stage of development. Thus, food crises continued to plague rural communities. In 1900–01, 1902–03, and 1911–12 famines ravaged the Shire Highlands. Megan Vaughan has stated that the 1922 famine was "the first famine in which the government took direct responsibility for distributing relief food" (Vaughan 1981, p. 164).

In actual fact, however, the colonial government had begun implementing such a strategy as early as 1902–03. As part of their relief effort that year, colonial officials transported grain and rice from Kota Kota, Zomba, and Blantyre districts to Chiromo District (259,000 lbs), Chikwawa District (17,462 lbs), Mlanje District (6,598 lbs), and Port Herald District (8,528 lbs). Several hundred families were also supported with wages for working on public works projects such as brickmaking and building construction (Public Records, London, CO525/2, Wheeler to Sharpe, 21
July 1904. Enclosure in Sharpe to Colonial Office, 2 August 1904; FO2/747, Pearce to Foreign Office, 4 May 1903; FO2/748, Pearce to Foreign Office, 30 June 1903).

During the 1911–12 famine, the state enacted a similar program, distributing at least 215 tons of food at cost price to the able-bodied and 65 tons of free issues to the aged, infirm, and children. A public works program saw male workers issued contracts for wood cutting, road building, and transport work (Public Records Office, London, CO525/48, Casson to Acting Government Secretary at Zomba, 10 March 1913. Enclosure in Pearce to Colonial Office, 5 April 1913).

The administration’s measures saved many lives, but were not entirely effective. Part of the problem was the country’s inadequate communications network, a legacy of the precolonial era. Information of shortages in areas remote from roads would have been slow in reaching the capital at Zomba. Even if administrators were aware of food crises in outlying areas, their main priority was to feed Africans near centres of industry to maintain the few labour supplies they had (Oral Tradition: Yosefe Chindime, Mchinji District, T.A. Mduwa, 3/6/92; Tobias Golden, Chiradzulu District, 19/7/92).

It also must be remembered that due to the limited amount of industry in the protectorate, massive wage labour and tax evasions and the physical and financial expenditures necessary to suppress the slave trade, the administration’s revenue base was too low to enable the establishment of an effective famine relief system (Laws 1934, p. 44; Public Records Office, London, F02/212, Captain C. Close, Report on Completion of Nyasa-Tanganyika Frontier, 5 January 1899, British Central African Times, 3 January 1903).

The Great War, 1914–18

The Great War represented a major setback to the material advancements of earlier years. There were many reasons for the overall drop in industrial production and endemic food crises that occurred throughout the war.

To begin, there was the diversion of a large proportion of the protectorate’s labour force away from domestic production toward military labour. At least 200,000 men participated in the war as carriers, soldiers, and other workers (Baker 1984, p. 27). Many of these men were decimated by modern weaponry, hunger, and disease (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, 543/1/17/1. Extracts from district annual reports. Notes on South Nyasa District, by Captain J. O’Brien, Resident Upper Shire District, 1924-29). The absence of thousands of able-bodied men from the rural economy was also devastating in the sense that it left the duty of food production to those least able to cope, such as women, the elderly, the infirm, and children (Duff 1932, p. 187). If this were not enough, the men who were working for the military still had to be fed, with the result that the burden once again fell upon those left behind (Nyasaland Times, 10 January 1918).

The worst hit areas during the war were those communities bordering Tanganyika. Not only were they forced to act as food suppliers, but they faced German attacks from across the border and food raids (Duff 1932, pp. 195–196). The most difficult years of the war appear to have been
1917–18, when poor weather and increased military demands for foodstuffs contributed to famine in the Southern Province (Life and Work, no. 2, April–December 1917, Nyasaland Times, 10 January 1918). Although the government enacted a famine relief program, its main priority was to defeat Germany; thus, most food supplies were probably destined for its troops in Portuguese Territory (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, S1/83/19, Duff to Colonial Office, 27 February 1991; Sibley 1971, p. 144).

**Limited Development, 1918–64**

Following the cessation of hostilities in 1918, Nyasaland resumed its pre-War trend of economic growth. Tobacco exports from estates rose from 5,805,396 pounds in 1918 to 11,632,496 pounds by 1928 (Arnold 1935, p. 380). One notable boost to production was the opening up of a tobacco industry based on tenant labour and peasant production in present-day Lilongwe and Dowa districts by A.T. Barron and R.W. Wallace (White 1989, p. 169).

The tea industry also showed signs of impressive growth (mainly in Cholo and Mlanje districts), with land under cultivation rising from 4,000 acres in 1915, to 5,000 acres in 1926, and to 7,000 acres in 1927 (Palmer 1985a, pp. 218–219). Reliable figures for the migrant labour sector are not available, but various estimates affirm high growth rates. (A labour census by the Nyasaland government estimated that in 1928–29 around 20,000 Nyasas were in Southern Rhodesia alone) (Nyasaland Times, 29 January 1929).

The number of Africans in skilled employment in Nyasaland itself hovered around 3,000 by the late 1920s (Nyasaland Times, 29 January 1929). It was actually peasant production — not production through wage labour — that exhibited the highest rates of growth in the post-War era. Peasant cotton production, for example, rose from 392 tons in 1922 to 2,486 tons in 1928 (Pachai 1978, p. 205). Meanwhile, peasant growers sold 1,276,00 pounds of tobacco in 1924 and 7,804,757 pounds in 1927. Some 66,321 peasants were cultivating tobacco alone by 1927 (Arnold 1935, p. 382). As was the case before the war, the economy still did not develop enough to ward off the possibility of major food crises. Indeed, in virtually every year after the war food shortages of minor or major magnitudes occurred throughout the protectorate.

In 1918–19, a dehabilitating influenza epidemic and drought contributed to food deficits (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, S1/83/19, Duff to Colonial Office, 27 February 1919). Following a period of drought in 1922, the protectorate experienced in 1922–23 "the greatest shortage of foodstuffs natives can remember" (Malawi National Archives, M3/1/1, Annual Medical and Sanitary Report, 1922).

Drought and the slow response of the Bowring administration gave rise to famine in Mombera's District in 1924–25. (On the slow response of the Bowring government see Chapter five of Nault (n.d.)). In 1925–26, excessive rains aggravated food shortages in Central and Southern Provinces (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, NSB/2/1/1, Lower Shire District; Annual Report, 1925–26; NSD/2/1/1, Annual Report for the Chiradzulu District for the Year Ending 31st March 1926; NSB/7/1, Annual Report, 1925–26, Neno (Central Shire) District).
Drought was again responsible for food woes in the Southern Province in 1927–28 (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, NSB/7/1/1, Annual Report, Blantyre and Central Shire Districts for the Year 1928), while marauding animals wreaked havoc upon crops in Kota Kota District (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, NN/1/3/6, Resident Nkhota-Kota to Chief Secretary, 30 April 1927).

The main impediment to economic advancement in the postwar period continued not to be the overexploitation of the workforce by capitalists as has often been argued, but their underexploitation. Indeed, estate owners voiced constant dissatisfaction with their inability to mobilize labour supplies on an efficient and regular basis. Of all types of workers, "upcountry" workers laboured the longest, averaging only 6 months of the year.

Tenant labourers, who conventional wisdom has portrayed as the most exploited social group, usually were "very irregular in attendance" and would often take 2 months or more to complete tasks that should have taken only a month. Estate owners complained of similar problems with "local" workers, who, owing to the distractions of home life, did not remain on estates longer than 3 months.

In every instance, planters complained of acute labour shortages at the time Africans were planting or harvesting crops. The ability of workers to retain independent access to land and their own food supply (which was not always possible in the precolonial era, but the general rule under colonialism) paradoxically proved a barrier to capitalist development (Malawi National Archives, Zomba, S1/1113/20, Farquhan to Chief Secretary of State, 15 December 1920).

Fatigued with settler capital's complaints and past attempts to develop Nyasaland along Western lines, officials in the postwar period throughout British Africa became increasingly attracted to the ideas of Frederick Lugard. Rather than advocating shaping Africa in Europe's image, as early administrations had aimed for, Lugard and his supporters now extolled the idea of a "dual mandate" — the preservation of tradition and the encouragement of modernity for the supposed mutual benefit of Europeans and Africans (Lugard 1922).

In practical terms, colonial administrations realized they could save funds and political difficulties by devolving to traditional authorities more administrative powers. Economically, Africans were accepted as peasant farmers, because foreign companies as well as the colonial state could more easily access their surpluses in this manner than through wage labour (Kennedy 1988, p. 17). The Great Depression, as it turned out, would prove pivotal for consolidating propeasant opinion among policymakers.

Although falling commodity prices during the Great Depression have often been implicated for an intensification of food crises in Africa (Shenton 1986, p. 103; Klein and Roberts 1987, p. 23), Nyasaland did not fit this model. The protectorate was indeed not immune to decreasing world market prices for its products, but, because the majority of its inhabitants retained access to their own food supplies, no serious consequences manifested themselves. Throughout the Depression, officials and settlers expressed worry over the food economy but, owing to fairly reliable weather and effective responses by the state, famines anticipated in 1928, 1929, and 1933 did not materialize (Nault n.d., see Chapter six).
The Depression, nonetheless, represented a watershed in Malawi’s political and economic history. Following the heavy blow low prices dealt to British colonial prestige, the state washed its hands of the affair by devolving more political authority toward traditional African leaders. For good reason, Tangri has characterized the colonial state’s post-Depression administrative policy as representing a "hardening" of the "dogmas of indirect rule" (Tangri 1972, pp. 292–293). Whereas previous Native Associations (made up of teachers, clerks, entrepreneurs, and other potentially progressive classes) had previously maintained some degree of access to the central government, the state now enshrined in its laws that the "chiefs were the premier legitimizing force regarding African administration" (Tangri 1972, pp. 292–293).

The second major consequence of the Depression was the abandonment of the state’s initial policy of supporting estate agriculture as an engine of economic development. Thus, officials, such as E.W. Davy, the Director of Agriculture, came to voice the previously heretical position that Nyasaland was "not a country which the European could colonise or make his home" (Nyasaland Times, 9 September 1930). An official named Downey similarly pronounced in 1930 that "it has become clearer every year that Nyasaland is not a country for the European settler" (Public Records Office, London, COS25/137, Minutes by Downey, 27 June 1930).

The results of official ambivalence to estate agriculture were soon all too evident. Between 1928 and 1934 a total of 97 estates were liquidated (Palmer 1985b, FN no. 43). At the same time, the settler population shrank from 229 in 1928 to 82 by 1935 (Chirwa 1992, p. 224). Whereas European estates had accounted for 17% of total cotton production and 57% of total tobacco production in 1927, the corresponding figures for 1933 were 4 and 28%, respectively (Chirwa 1992, p. 231).

The Depression was further a watershed in the sense that the direction of state policy had now completely shifted toward peasant agriculture and the promotion of a bureaucracy to control and appropriate surpluses from this sector of the economy. Throughout Nyasaland and the colonial world officials embarked on a flurry of conservationist projects and irrigation schemes, attempting at the same time to spread modern agricultural techniques among peasant communities (Mandala 1990, pp. 206–207). Official opinion increasingly implicated middlemen as the source of woe for peasants, the end result being a proliferation of parasitical, state-controlled marketing boards (Shenton 1986, p. 107–116). Rather than completing its historic mission to transform Nyasaland into a capitalist economy, the colonial state effectively abrogated this role by seeking support from and bolstering the very forces which kept Malawi out of the modern world. To be sure, botched colonial policy was not enough to prevent a certain level of capitalist development from occurring regardless (Warren 1984; Warren’s statistic’s indicate the wage labour continued to grow throughout the colonial world after 1945).

Nonetheless, had successive colonial administrations held firm to the state’s original vision of large-scale agriculture and export-oriented growth development would have been more pronounced. Notions of a "dual mandate" may have appeared humanitarian and assuaged the liberal conscience but, in reality, the idea that a country could enter the modern world while still practicing ancient customs contributed little to economic advancement. The 1949 famine, so eloquently discussed by Meghan Vaughan (Vaughan 1987), was ample testimony to the self-defeating nature of peasant-oriented production.
Independent Malawi, 1964 to the Present

In the long run, imperialism was indeed a "pioneer of capitalism" (Warren 1984), but in the case of Nyasaland the transformation was left half completed. Independent Malawi was thus left with a host of unresolved problems and new dilemmas. Backward-looking traditional authorities continued to wield influence, constraining policy options. In particular, traditional authorities' reluctance to alter precapitalist forms of land tenure has proven to be an obstacle to progress (Thomas 1975, pp. 30–51). Expanding upon the institutions left by colonial rule, the state tightened its grip over peasant producers. Because it was those who wielded state power who enjoyed the greatest prestige in colonial times, it was not unexpected that educated Malawians would choose the state as a means of accumulation rather than innovate within the postcolonial economy (Pike 1968, pp. 219–220).

Although President Banda demonstrated rare foresight among African leaders and came to favour large-scale agricultural enterprises (Mulwafu 1990, p. 95), the majority of Malawians still continued to work small plots of land with primitive technologies. Initially, the postcolonial state adopted a peasant-oriented development strategy. After 1968, however, Banda cautiously began encouraging large-scale farming and estate agriculture (Mulwafu 1990, p. 108). At the same time, population pressures reduced the fertility of soils inducing the need for expensive fertilizers. Regional famines, although well-hidden from the international media, surfaced periodically (Laslett 1985, pp. 383–406).

The 1992 drought and famine dispelled the widely believed myth of Malawi as an African showcase where famine was nonexistent (Liebenow 1987). For all its talk of "food self-sufficiency" in previous years, Malawi was now forced to empty its foreign currency reserves to purchase foodstuffs from abroad and rely upon international donations. (Several thousand tons of grain were purchased in this manner from Brazil and Canada.)

Sensing an opportunity to undermine the Banda government, opposition groups urged immediate political reform and democratization (Anon. 1992). Western governments, wincing under the effects of the global recession and complacent with the end of the Cold War, were all too glad to link political change to further economic aid packages, seeing how aid could now be withheld for "politically correct" reasons. Not surprisingly, many observers were predicting an economic and

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1 Smallholders used 1,083 tons of fertilizers in 1960. By 1967 that amount had already risen to 10,834 tons (Liebenow 1987, p. 379). The current population to land problem was not the result of excessive land alienations by colonialists. Rather, it has paradoxically resulted from the longer life span made possible by advancements during the colonial and postcolonial periods (see Chapter two and Chapter five of Nault [n.d.]). Malawi's current problems with ecological degradation and high population densities also demonstrate the limits to peasant smallholder production, because high population densities in highly capitalised developed nations (for example, Holland) do not interfere with questions of food supply.

2 Suspension of Western Aid, Keesing's Record of World Events, 1992, 38898; Refusal of Aid By Norway, Keesing's Record of World Events, 1992, 39039. Norway suspended aid in late August. Following a meeting of the world bank in Paris in May, Western donor nations blocked US$74,000,000 in new aid, pending political reforms.
political disaster ("Threat of Starvation Intensifies Opposition to Government," London Times, 27 May 1992). Nonetheless, if the famine initially gave cause for despair, it eventually gave cause for optimism. Despite wrong turns at different points in Malawi's history, the Banda government's renewed emphasis upon estate agriculture in the postcolonial period meant that Malawi in 1992 was more developed than it had been under colonial rule. For a favourable appraisal of the government's shift toward large-scale agriculture see, Acharya (1982, pp. 109–147) and Livingstone (1985, pp. 169–192).

Unlike poor relations such as Sudan and Somalia, Malawi had experienced nearly three decades of political stability and export-oriented growth that had left her with significant revenues to purchase foodstuffs from abroad. Sufficient external donations of foodstuffs, a nonexistent possibility in colonial times, also flowed in to stave off the crisis. Although the combined relief effort was not without its flaws, capitalist development in both the West and Malawi provided sufficient wealth, appropriate institutions, communications, and expertise to ward off epidemics and mass starvation.

**Conclusion**

Tracing the background to the 1992 famine in Malawi, this paper has shown that food insecurity has been a problem for peasant societies since precolonial times. This account agrees with previous works that argue that the colonial era was of pivotal importance for shaping the presence circumstances in which food crises occur in Africa. I have argued, however, that the colonial state and capital were limited in power and resources and frequently had to adapt to the wishes of the populace at large.

The colonial state's eventual acceptance of peasant over estate production after the Great Depression thus was largely the result of the peasantry's ability to evade wage labour and retain independent access to land. With the overall wealth within the protectorate consequently remaining low, the country's institutions could never be sufficiently developed to ward off famine. Had the colonial state persevered with its original vision of an estate sector spearheading economic growth, perhaps the colonial legacy would have been less ambivalent. As it turned out, however, independent Malawi was left with the unresolved issue of transforming the peasantry into wage labourers.

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3In spite of reduced Western aid for general development, Malawi still received substantial funds for drought relief. At the World Bank's meeting in Paris from 12 to 14 May 1992, Western donors withheld funds for general economic development but pledged $170,000,000 in drought aid (Suspension of Western Aid, Keesing's Record of World Events, 38898. See also UK Gives Further L1 Million in Aid as Drought Continues in South Africa, London Times, 14 March).

4When in Malawi, I heard at least one case of corruption involving government employees during food distribution. Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) reports also mentioned cases of Malawians posing as Mozambiquan refugees and individuals using false identities to get extra rations.
A complete transformation still remained to be effected by 1992, with the result that drought was able to turn into famine. On an optimistic note, however, capitalism had indeed been developing throughout the postcolonial period in Malawi and the world at large. The proceeds and expertise and establishment of proper institutions from this development ensured that 1992 in Malawi did not witness the great loss of life and dislocation familiar during most African famines.

It would seem, then, that the future elimination of food crises in Malawi will not depend upon reproducing or preserving peasant societies but upon transforming and transcending their mode of existence. Although social strains will continue to manifest themselves, it is imperative that official policies continue to support capital and the growth of wage labour relations. Sentimental portrayals of the African precolonial past and appeals to "African socialism," common in the heady days of the 1960s, today have little relevance for eradicating age-old but solvable social problems such as famine.

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