

PREFACE

This book is a comprehensive account of the origins and early history of the Chewa who began to refer to themselves as ‘A Malawi’ (the Malawi) at some point after they arrived in the southern Lake Malawi area. Seventeenth-century Portuguese explorers and traders recorded the term as ‘Maravi’ whereas modern scholars use ‘Maravi’ interchangeably with the term ‘Chewa’.

Some readers will undoubtedly be surprised that an archaeologist rather than a historian has written this book. They should bear in mind though that archaeology is the only tool available for unearthing (literally) history and culture before any written records. Archaeologists call that time the pre-historic period and that is where the narration of the origins and early history of the Chewa begins. It ends about two decades before the imposition of colonial rule by the British in 1891.

Before delving into the narration, here is a synopsis of the intellectual journey that has brought me to this point. During the first few decades of the colonial period, the British attempted to record the oral traditions of the various indigenous groups in the country, perhaps with a view towards understanding their history. They published nothing from the exercise and any history taught in the country’s schools was the history of the British themselves. In primary school, the favourite topics included Dr David Livingstone’s exploration of the country and of other parts of southern Africa. Pupils also learned about the efforts of early Scottish missionaries to establish mission stations and schools, and about the arrival in Malawi of early British traders and settlers. The traders established the African Lakes Company, a trading company that locally assumed the name Mandala, meaning ‘spectacles’ (a fascination to the local people), worn by one of the joint managers, John Moir.¹

In secondary school, students came face to face with the history of the British Empire and the Commonwealth. Teachers drilled them in this history so well that some of those students still vividly recall important events in British colonial history. Perhaps what is unfortunate is that they can intelligently discuss events such as the Boston Tea Party, the Black Hole of Calcutta incident, the Anglo-Boer war and others better than they can the arrival of the Chewa at Mankhamba, or of the Tumbuka, Yao or Ngoni in various parts of the country.

Not long after Malawi became independent of colonial rule, the book *Mbiri ya Achewa (The History of the Chewa)*, written by Samuel Josia Ntara, was introduced as required reading in secondary schools.² It is now out of print, but it is the only book that

1 Kalinga OJM & Crosby CA. 2001. *Historical Dictionary of Malawi*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press: 234.

2 Richard Grey Kankondo, the author’s secondary school Chichewa teacher, personal communication, 7 January 2019.

has ever been published on the history of the Chewa. Still, the fact that teachers used the book not in a history class, but in a Chichewa language class, is indicative of how education authorities regarded it. They viewed it as a Chichewa literature book and not as a history textbook. Perhaps the intention of the authorities was to make students appreciate Chichewa as spoken in central Malawi. Ntara was a Chewa from that region, as was the president at the time, Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Four years after Malawi became an independent country, the president made Chichewa the country's national language. The school I attended was located in southern Malawi, where the common language is Chinyanja. The majority of the students were not used to Chichewa and, consequently, did not enjoy reading the book. However, as a budding archaeologist I enjoyed reading it and it was in this book that I first learned that a place called Mankhamba was said to be the original settlement site of the Chewa.

Ntara's book was based on oral traditions. This is also true regarding almost everything that is available on the history and culture of the Chewa. Scholars simply arranged to interview people in various Chewa villages after which they analysed the information and disseminated the results. Unfortunately, the most comprehensive of those studies resulted in unpublished doctoral theses, none of which is available for general reading.

When I went to study at the University of Malawi's Chancellor College, I found that nothing much seemed to have changed regarding the kind of history offered to students. The only difference was that this time it was not by design. There were simply no resources available to enable even the most enthusiastic lecturers to create a good course on the history of Malawi before the colonial period. Instead, they taught students about the history of Portuguese settlement and the colonisation of Mozambique, American history, the slave trade, and the conflict between the British and the Dutch in South Africa. When it came to Malawi, they taught only the well-documented story of John Chilembwe's 1915 uprising against colonial rule and other topics related to the colonial period. Nevertheless, I graduated, majoring in History (albeit not Malawi's) and Sociology. Subsequently, I joined the Malawi Department of Antiquities which is where I had my first contact with archaeology.

Unlike historians, archaeologists are unlikely to record oral traditions, unless they are convinced that the traditions will significantly clarify some aspects of their archaeological data. Success in archaeology depends on locating suitable archaeological sites. I needed to locate either the site of Mankhamba or any suitable sites in the various areas where the Chewa had settled. In fact, I would have been perfectly satisfied with any settlement site of the early Chewa, but God in the heavenly skies was smiling on me. I located the site of Mankhamba itself. I excavated it and recovered a wide range of material remains, including imported material such as glass beads, Chinese porcelain and objects made of copper.

The material remains that archaeologists recover are objects that people made or acquired, used and then discarded or abandoned after use. In other words, the objects had become garbage, as the people no longer needed them. Producing garbage has been an aspect of human behavior throughout history and archaeologists are in the business of looking for places where the ancient people lived or threw away their garbage. When they find such places, they dig them up in a systematic manner. To the archaeologist, the objects recovered in the excavations are no longer garbage but important material remains. After recovering them, the next step is to make the remains ‘speak’ or tell their story. This is achieved by the careful study and analysis of the material remains so that their story is brought to a level that is discernible even to non-archaeologists. That is exactly what I did with the material remains that I excavated at Mankhamba. Among other things, they show that the Chewa lived a good and prosperous life and that their way of life made them economically, politically and militarily powerful. As a result, they were able to expand their area of influence so widely that Portuguese settlers of the early seventeenth century were compelled to refer to their king as the Emperor of the ‘empire of Maravi’.³

What to expect

Realising that many readers may not have sufficient knowledge regarding the history of research into Malawi’s past, how archaeologists do their work, and the environment of the research area, I have provided that information in Chapter 1 and in Chapters 5–7.

Chapter 1 discusses the efforts of early European explorers, missionaries and settlers in recording Malawi’s history. The chapter begins by listing Malawi’s major ethnic groups and the initial attempts to record their oral traditions and some aspects of indigenous life. When the country became a British colony, colonial district administrators did the same in their respective districts. The later part of the colonial period witnessed the emergence of indigenous scholars. Some of them recorded the oral traditions of their respective ethnic groups and proceeded to write books about their histories. Ntara was one of them.

Soon after Malawi became an independent country in 1964, the newly established University of Malawi and the Malawi government initiated efforts to develop professional cultural heritage personnel. They identified young Malawian college graduates and sent them abroad to study History, Archaeology or Museum Management. Some of them acquired doctoral degrees and on returning home, they embarked on various research projects in history and archaeology.

Chapter 5 is about the practice of archaeology itself, but this is discussed in a non-technical way. Readers with little or no knowledge of archaeology will find this chapter enlightening, as — among other things — it discusses how archaeologists locate and

3 Barretto M. 1964. Report upon the State and Conquest of the Rivers of Cuama. In *Records of South-Eastern Africa*. Vol. 3. GM Theal (ed). Cape Town: Struik: 480.

excavate sites, and analyse the material they recover. There is also a section in which I discuss some of the dating methods, such as carbon-14 (C-14) dating. This chapter will give readers enough archaeological knowledge to enable them to appreciate and enjoy the chapters that follow.

Chapter 6 discusses the archaeological research that various researchers carried out in the southern Lake Malawi area before the discovery and excavation of the Mankhamba site. All the sites they investigated were Iron Age sites, which led me to discuss the importance of pottery in Iron Age archaeological research. It is pertinent to point out that details about the Iron Age archaeology of the southern Lake Malawi area have been published extensively and so archaeologists are familiar with this. The area has an unbroken Iron Age pottery sequence dating from the early third century to the nineteenth century, when the current modern pottery began to emerge.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the environment of the Mankhamba area, which migrants like the Chewa found attractive for settlement. Also discussed in that chapter is the archaeological survey that led to the discovery of the Mankhamba site and the excavation itself. The results of the analysis and the interpretation of the material remains are the central foci of the rest of the book.