

H.B.M. CHIPEMBERE, 1930-1975

MALAWI PATRIOT

by

Earl H. Phillips

Henry Chipembere ("Chip" to his friends, admirers and followers), died in Los Angeles on September 24, 1975, after a short period of failing health. The burden of his death falls most heavily on his wife, children, and immediate family; but his circle of friends and acquaintances have lost something too, for we will not see his like again. And to countless Malawians, at home or in exile, his death snuffed out the faint yet lingering hope that someday his return to that country would bring a new beginning, a fresh start that would re-establish those liberties so hard won but savored so briefly. For Henry Chipembere was a patriot, pan-Africanist and leader who loved Malawi and its people deeply, and a man who contributed and suffered a great deal for his country's freedom. This is his story, briefly told.¹

Malawi traces its origins to the ancient kingdom of that name lying to the west of Lake Malawi, the most southern of the African inland seas. Its modern boundaries are the result of an imperial rivalry that established the British Central African Protectorate in 1891 as a device to prevent Portugal from claiming the area. The Protectorate was renamed Nyasaland in 1907, a name that was retained until independence in 1964 when the earlier name was officially reintroduced.

Henry Chipembere's parents are a product of the turbulent history of the lake region. His father's forebears (of southern and central Malawi stock) migrated to the eastern shore of the lake in the nineteenth century in an effort to escape Ngoni invasions. Settling amongst Yao people, the Malawians became expert fishermen while some engaged in long-distance commerce with the east coast. Chip's father, although Malawian, was thus born in modern Mozambique while his mother was of mixed Malawi and Yao parentage, suggesting

a considerable intermingling of the two peoples.

His father converted to Christianity and was ordained in the Anglican community in 1919, rising to the rank of Archdeacon after many years service in the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA). Rev. Chipembere returned home permanently when his pastoral duties were confined to Nyasaland and he began raising a family as he moved from one UMCA station to another. At Kayoyo, in what was then the Nkhota-Koto District, Chip was born on August 5, 1930, the fourth in what was to become a family of eight children, five girls and three boys.

At birth, Chip was given the traditional name Masauko ("suffering"), signifying the difficulty experienced by his mother during delivery. His father later baptized him Henry Blasius and would never countenance the use of the pre-baptismal name. The traditional name thus remained dormant until Chip's later entry into the political arena, when African names were revived and "Masauko" was found to be particularly descriptive of Nyasaland's political struggle and suffering.

As a child, Chip's life was pleasant enough. His father's profession required mobility and the family moved from mission station to station. The growing boy took an interest in sports, became an active church member, and as a result of family, school, and church influences developed at an early age those principles of fairness and honesty that were to remain with him for the rest of his life.

Formal education commenced, always at boarding schools removed from his family where discipline was strict and study habits enforced. First there was the UMCA school at Malosa, followed by Blantyre Secondary School where Chip distinguished himself academically, placing first in the entire country in sixth and eighth grade examinations. And he achieved some notoriety also, for it was at Blantyre that this quiet and studious young man from a strongly religious background participated in a student strike against the quality of food being served. And it was at this same school that Chip changed his name. Correctly, the family name was *Chipembele*, but boys in whose language the "l" sound was unusual tended to change that letter to an "r" and the spelling *Chipembere* took hold permanently.

The next stage in the young man's development removed him even further from his family, for his education now took him for two years to Goromonzi school in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. Taking an interest in politics, he saw at first hand the imprint of white settler control and heard more and

more of the scheme to federate Northern and Southern Rhodesia with Nyasaland to perpetuate settler authority over the entire area. Although Chip did not know it then, this was the issue that was to engross him for the next fifteen years, but there first remained more education and study to be accomplished.

The Indian government at that time was offering university scholarships to African students, and with Chip's outstanding academic record his application was favorably received. But the Nyasaland authorities were dubious about this already politicized young man going to India to learn goodness-knows-what in a country that had just cast off colonial rule; far better to send him to South Africa where the political climate was safer. Accordingly, Chip was awarded a Nyasaland Government scholarship to Fort Hare College in Cape Province where he studied history and politics. But far from being a "safer" intellectual climate, the politically aware young Malawian became even more conscious of white settlerism and spent long hours discussing political issues with students from all over southern Africa.

Barely twenty-four years old, Chip returned home in 1954 with a Bachelor of Arts degree, finding himself to be one of only four or five Malawians with a college education (from a population at that time of about three millions or so). He immediately became part of an experiment to place Africans in the administrative branch of the civil service and was appointed Assistant District Commissioner at Domasi, in the Zomba District. But even then he found the lot of Africans filling positions previously held by expatriates to be inferior: not only did his degree warrant a better position than the one offered, but the house assigned him was inadequate and would not have been given to a European.

But he took this in stride for his political ideas were now maturing and his new position gave him perfect opportunity to meet, convince, and politicize the important personages and groups in the district under his supervision. His message was very simple: the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland had to be destroyed. He joined the Nyasaland African Congress to further this end, at that time a party of moderate ambitions.

The Federation was the dominant issue. Created in 1953, it was in theory a multi-racial partnership between black and white in the three territories. But in the real world the federal constitution offered few effective safeguards for African rights and the dominant partner, Southern Rhodesia, was firmly controlled by white settlers. There had been a good deal of economic interdependence between the territories

for a long time, of course, and the 1950's was a period of multi-racial constitutions in East Africa. And a persuasive argument was propounded to support a formal union: the mineral wealth of Northern Rhodesia would complement the manufacturing ability and skilled white manpower of Southern Rhodesia while Nyasaland, with neither minerals nor industry, would furnish the unskilled labor.

The truth of the matter was that Federation was a tactic to maintain settler supremacy by persuading Britain that union was economically and politically viable and that independence should be granted. But far from a federation of equals, the Federal Prime Minister called Nyasaland an "imperial slum" and stated that Africans were unfit for partnership. In an unguarded moment Federation had even been likened to the relationship between a horse and its rider -- with Europeans in the saddle.

This was the position when Henry Chipembere formally entered the political world, resigning his civil service position to run for the Legislative Council in the 1956 elections. It was during this campaign that a different dimension of his character appeared, one far removed from his reserved, quiet, and rather studious nature. Impassioned by the truth and justice of his cause, he emerged as a bold and dynamic public speaker, fiery and charismatic, capable of rousing and holding large crowds as he denounced the Federation in no uncertain terms. It was but the first stage of perpetual white rule, he told his audiences, that would forever consign Nyasaland to the political and economic subjugation of the white settlers of the Rhodesias.

Chip's message took hold, sending him to the Legislative Council as the representative from Fort Johnston. There he met M.W.Kanyama Chiume and a few other young men with views similar to his own, all elected with large majorities and members of the Nyasaland African Congress. Filled with optimism at the beginning of a new career, it was now time for his marriage to Catherine Ambali, a young lady from Likoma Island whom he had known for ten years. Catherine's family had opposed the engagement but Chip's political success swept away remaining objections and the wedding took place in 1957. Tested later by separation, ill-health, imprisonment and strained finances, the marriage held firm and resulted in the birth of seven children, four girls and three boys.

The Federation moved much closer to independence that same year when it assumed complete internal autonomy and greater external authority. With the machinery of government and power in the hands of the white settlers it was plain to

Chip that complete independence would result in a state on the South African model in which Africans had no share. And although he and his youthful colleagues in the Legislative Council and Congress party were fully alive to the situation they found themselves lacking the influence to sway the older Congress leadership. What was needed, they thought, was a man similarly committed to their principles who by virtue of age and experience could command the authority they lacked.

At the 1957 annual conference of the party, Chip and his friends Chiume and Dunduzu Chisiza, all members of the party's Executive Committee, proposed such a person to the delegates: Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. He should be invited home to assume leadership of the party, they argued, because of his education, professional achievements and long exposure to the West; he would be the ideal man to lead the struggle out of the Federation.

A medical doctor, Banda was not unknown although he had not set foot in the country of his birth for more than forty years and had no political constituency. He had left Nyasaland as a youth, the search for education taking him to South Africa, the United States and Britain. In 1953, practicing medicine in England, he had supported a delegation of visiting Nyasaland chiefs protesting the Federation. In disgust at the failure of their mission he went to Ghana, and practised in Kumasi. Dr. Banda was persuaded by the young nationalists to return home and lead Malawi - as they wished their country to be known -- out of the Federation.

Chipembere, Chiume and Chisiza campaigned energetically to popularize the returning expatriate. Indeed, they were so successful that when Banda stepped from his plane in 1958 he received a tumultuous welcome, the people already worshipping him and convinced that this Moses would lead his children out of the land of bondage. Accepting the Congress leadership thrust upon him, Banda's avowed intent was to secede from the Federation and seek self-government. If peaceful avenues to these objectives were blocked, he warned, violence would follow; he invited arrest and expressed his willingness to die if the sacrifice would bring the end of white rule.

The arrival of Dr. Banda brought into sharp focus the smoldering forces of political discontent. Chipembere, Chiume, Chisiza and Banda embarked on speaking tours that rallied the country to an increasingly militant opposition to the Federation and the settler control it epitomized. The first sporadic acts of violence took place, which although officially described as rioting, bordered more on rebellion. Mission buildings and government property were burned or destroyed; roads were block-

ed; meetings were held without permission and laws and regulations were openly defied. Retaliation was welcomed, and when the police appeared they were hissed, booed and stoned.

These actions so completely overwhelmed the security forces that an Emergency was declared in March, 1959, which banned the Congress party and brought the arrest of Chip, Banda, and the other leaders. This served merely to inflame the situation and the subsequent nationalist uprising brought the arrival of white troops from Southern Rhodesia. Chip, a peaceful man, had taken no part in the violence but his detention in Southern Rhodesia was acknowledgement of the role he had played in the original organization of opposition and its subsequent development.

In enforced inactivity, Chip busied himself writing speeches for future audiences while news flowed in of the suppression of political activity in Nyasaland and the loss of lives. But unknown to him, the tactics were working. Ultimately responsible, Britain had now become uneasy at the intensity of opposition and at the forceful suppression of African aspirations and opinion by federal forces. A Commission investigated the entire issue, its subsequent report calling the partnership a sham for Africans and recommending the three territories be given the right to secede. The report unlocked Chip's prison door and he returned home in triumph to become General Treasurer of a reconstituted Malawi Congress Party. The task was now to engineer secession and prepare for self-government.

Although Chip recognized that these goals would be achieved, his plan was now to speed up the process and force the British hand as quickly as possible. Armed with his speeches, he immediately went to the people, knowing full well that he was courting official retaliation. Sure enough, it came. After only four months freedom he was arrested in February, 1961, and tried for sedition and inciting violence. The charges stuck and he was returned to jail, this time in Zomba, where he remained for two years.

Although out of action again, Chip had the satisfaction of seeing his goals realized. Elections under a new franchise were held in August, 1961, giving the Congress Party a majority in the Legislative Assembly and putting more authority in Dr. Banda's hands. He now demanded secession, ignoring the federal capital at Salisbury and refusing cooperation with federal officials. A new constitution with internal self-government was introduced in February, 1963, and Henry Chipembere - a national hero - was released from prison to join the Cabinet, first as Minister of Local Government then as Minister of Education.

With an end of the Federation now in sight and with preparation afoot for independence, 1963 was a banner year, full of high hopes and optimism. The people responded magnificently to their leaders' calls for national unity; development plans were underway and healthy innovations under Chip's direction began to take hold in educational policy. Secession was accomplished at the end of the year, followed in July, 1964, by the achievement of full independence by the new state of Malawi - a monument to the vision, courage and sacrifice of Masauko Chipembere. But beneath the facade of goodwill and unity, serious discord was already emerging in the ranks of the country's political leaders, especially between Dr. Banda and the younger people around him in the Cabinet. The source of the problem was Prime Minister Banda himself.

After spending the better part of his life outside Malawi, Banda was still a comparative newcomer who lacked a firm political base. He recognized this full well and he was particularly jealous and fearful of the younger leaders - all potential replacements or successors - such as Chipembere, Chiume and Chisiza. These were the men who had built the nationalist movement from the beginning, knew the country and the temper of its people better than he, enjoyed wide popularity and stood on a broad political constituency. In his mind, they all posed threats to his leadership and he began to move against them in late 1963, lecturing and berating them in public, treating them as children and referring to them as "my boys." Conversely, he insisted on being referred to in such deferential terms as "Dear Father," this unpleasant and humiliating paternalism designed to discredit and denigrate them while strengthening his own position.

These shabby tactics were stepped up at the time of independence, when Chip was singled out for particularly vitriolic attack as he enjoyed such a large following, especially in the southern portion of the country. But he was not the only one. The Prime Minister called on all citizens to carefully watch the activities of potentially corrupt Cabinet members and to report to him directly. To even further reduce Cabinet confidence in his leadership, Banda began formulating policy without consultation while refusing to allow his Ministers from making decisions affecting their own departments.

The inability of Dr. Banda to understand that unity was the basic principle of Cabinet government was damaging enough, as were his attempts to build his own political base at the expense of his colleagues. But even more important areas of contention had arisen. For example, civil service salaries had been reduced - especially aggravating in light of the

sumptuousness of Dr. Banda's personal living. Hospital out-patient fees had been imposed, a measure which adversely affected everyone. There was no agricultural program, and Dr. Banda was pushing for legislation to allow preventive detention. Additionally, Africanization of the civil service dominated by expatriates was painfully slow, leading to the suspicion that the Prime Minister was reluctant to Africanize at all, feeling more comfortable with Europeans as his closest policy advisors.

All these issues brought discord to the ruling circles of government. But to Chipembere there was a mounting conviction that Dr. Banda was following a fatal course in his relations with southern Africa and one which broke the party's election pledge to participate actively in the liberation of white-dominated Africa.

In Chip's view, Malawi's policy toward southern Africa faced three basic alternatives: continuation of the existing pattern of relationships established by the colonial system; the strengthening of these relations; or conversely, seeking means to weaken or abolish them. To him, the choice was very clear. A policy of decreasing dependence should be followed that would, for example, seek an alternate route to the coast through Tanzania and thus break the country's dependence on Portuguese-Mozambique road and rail links to the port of Beira. Additionally, Malawi should seek new trading partners outside the southern Africa bloc and opportunities for employment should be provided at home in order to stop the drain of Malawian manpower to South Africa.

But far from developing policies designed to loosen the economic and communications grip on Malawi (while to some degree embarrassing the economics of the white-dominated southern bloc), Dr. Banda chose instead to further solidify the existing ties with Portugal and Mozambique, Southern Rhodesia and South Africa. In so doing he more and more abandoned non-alignment, strengthening relations with the West while deliberately outraging the O.A.U. and throwing away any pretense of a pan-African policy.

These were the issues facing the Cabinet at the time of independence, and with nothing resolved, Chipembere left in mid-August to attend an educational conference in Canada. No sooner had he gone than all the issues surfaced in a stormy Cabinet meeting that lasted two days. Everything was brought out, and to the jubilation of the younger dissidents the Prime Minister agreed to all their proposals, pleading only that everything could not be accomplished immediately. The struggle

had been won, apparently. But such was not the case.

Charging that he had been tricked, Banda dismissed four of his Ministers and called an Emergency session of the Assembly. Two more Ministers resigned in protest at this abrogation of the agreement, leaving the Prime Minister with a decimated Cabinet plus Henry Chipembere, whom Banda recognized as the key to the crisis. If Chip stayed with him he could survive this precarious situation; but if he sided with the "rebels," taking with him his national support, Banda's position would be tenuous in the extreme.

With Chip hurrying home, the Assembly convened in a moment of high drama on Tuesday, September 8, the first session since independence. Outside the building a swelling crowd made evident its sympathy for the dissidents. Inside, the old chairs and tables used by colonial officials and Protectorate politicians had been replaced with upholstered tiered benches, now packed with Members as the Prime Minister commenced a harangue against his former colleagues. Using their popular nicknames he denounced them one by one, recounting uncomplimentary stories and accusing them of disunity, disloyalty, disobedience, avarice, ambition, bribery, favoritism - and even treason. Loudspeakers had been installed outside to sway the crowd with the Prime Minister's oratory, but while his supporters in the Assembly clapped and cheered their approval the crowd outside roared its support for the "rebels."

Chip arrived home that afternoon, anxious and depressed at the turn of events and greeted at the airport with a note from Dr. Banda asking his support. At home, he listened to a recording of the Assembly proceedings and discussed with his friends the events which had taken place during his absence. He was angered by the suspicion that his telephone had been tapped, and the police cars moving conspicuously around the house did not improve his frame of mind. Particularly disturbing was the fact that his family, fearing the possibility of a hasty departure, had already accomplished a lot of precautionary packing.

Chip debated his course. The policy differences between Banda and himself were basic and fundamental, yet he retained great respect for the older man who had played such an important part in the national struggle. Could he still be persuaded to implement a more rapid Africanization policy? Could his mind be changed about relations with the white regimes? Could he be made to realize that the younger men around him were not threatening his position, that they were men of integrity and ability who desired only the success and

unity of Malawi? And if he could not be moved on these issues, what then? Chip recognized very clearly the reality of African politics: men rose to power --and retained power-- with the support of the army. In Malawi, both the army and police were led by Europeans close to Dr. Banda, and there was no doubt where their support would go in the event of a confrontation.

Weighing all this, there was still one more issue. If he should side with Banda against his friends, his own position would be secure. But for how long? There was Dr. Banda's morbid jealousy of political rivals, and although the Prime Minister would welcome his immediate support, it would not be long before some issue would be engineered to discredit him and so clear the field of his sole remaining political heir. Thus, all things considered, principle had to take place over expediency and he must support the dissidents against Dr. Banda, no matter the cost or consequences.

His mind made up, Chip arrived at the Assembly next morning shortly before the session was to begin. The fact that he arrived in a government car was not lost on the gathered crowd, who misinterpreted the official vehicle as Chip's decision to support the Prime Minister. But flashing a victory sign, he assured them that this was the last time he would be using such a car; he was resigning. The roar of the crowd was immediate, only to be replaced by boos as the Prime Minister drew up moments later.

Events then moved very quickly. Chip openly challenged the Prime Minister's leadership in a speech at Fort Johnston and fighting broke out in the larger cities. And as he had anticipated, the uprising was put down by the army and police. While Chip sought refuge in the hills, his family made their way to the comparative safety of Catherine's home on Likoma Island, but this did not last long. Still separated from Chip, they escaped to Tanzania, which with Zambia became the principle havens for the exiles streaming from the country. Chip's parents, his brothers and sisters were also forced to flee, leaving behind only one sister and his elder brother who was arrested and held hostage for Chip's behaviour.

The subsequent history of Malawi has proved a sorry aftermath to the brave days of 1964 when the country became free, full of hope, promise and expectation. A generation of political leaders went into exile while those not so lucky were detained in the notorious Dzeleka camp. Beatings and politically-inspired arson became commonplace for less important figures, accompanied by the muzzling of the press, mail censorship, detention, the proscription of religious sects and the

other aspects of an authoritarian regime that brooks no dissent. At the same time, the country's connections with South Africa were broadened and Africanization even slowed down; Dr. Banda became an outcast among other African states and leaders.

Not cut out for the life of a guerrilla, Henry Chipembere's career took a new turn. Making his way to the United States in 1965, he began work on a Master's degree in political science at U.C.L.A. His family joined him the following year, then it was back to Africa, to Kivukoni College at Dar es Salaam, a TANU school, to begin the new profession of tutor and teacher. The Malawi refugees were shown great kindness and sympathy by the people and government of Tanzania, but the life of a political exile was not easy. Chip's natural good humor and optimism were now characteristics that stood him in good stead, helping to overcome the frustrations, anxieties, the uncertainty and hardship of refugee life.

Minor quarrels and disputes began to take place among the exiles, ultimately giving way to the overriding question of what was to be done? One wing of opinion opted for an armed invasion of Malawi, banking on it to trigger a popular uprising that would topple the regime. Chip, on the other hand, opposed the proposal arguing that such an incursion would invite disaster in view of the efficiency of Dr. Banda's security forces. Agreement could not be reached, and against Chip's advice an invasion took place, fulfilling his prophecy and resulting in the death of his friend Yatuta Chisiza.

Reinforced by constant expressions of support from Malawi and the knowledge that his name was still a vital force, Chip remained optimistic that the course of events in his homeland would demand his return. To prepare for that day he founded the Panafrican Democratic Party of Malawi, but the passage of time instead resulted in Dr. Banda's grip growing even tighter, and in Tanzania the friction between the exiles grew accordingly. Chip was in the eye of the storm, and to compound the difficulties his income was barely sufficient to support his family, let alone administer to the needs of his parents. To make matters worse, his health deteriorated.

Chip had been receiving treatment for diabetes for several years, a condition which requires close attention to diet and freedom from anxiety, stress and tension. But due to the conditions which now surrounded him the disease was taking its toll and required medical attention not readily available in Tanzania. Thus, because of friction with fellow exiles, financial pressures and health considerations, he made the

decision to return to the United States and pursue a doctoral degree at U.C.L.A.

He arrived in Los Angeles in 1969 to embark on his new program. Under medical attention, he was nevertheless very content to have his family around him, the children in school, and removed from the push and pull of exile politics. He immersed himself in reading and study, his remaining concern one of personal finances and the high costs of maintaining his family. Thus, he was delighted when approached about an appointment at California State University, Los Angeles. He recognized the added demands he would now have to face: much work remained in his doctoral program; there were the normal family responsibilities --soon to be increased by the birth of a seventh child--and now there would be the additional tasks of preparing lectures, meeting students, and the other obligations of academic life. Nevertheless, the position promised economic independence and he accepted the appointment of Assistant Professor of History.

It had been recognized by his new colleagues that in a formal sense Chip was not yet prepared for an academic appointment, his doctoral program being several years from completion. But it was felt that Henry Chipembere's background and personal experience offered such a unique amalgam of contemporary African history and politics that his presence in the department would add significantly to the integrity of its curriculum and that the exposure of students to such a distinguished and knowledgeable person would be of great benefit.

That is precisely what happened. Chip quickly established himself as a conscientious and dedicated classroom teacher who devoted long hours to the preparation of each lecture and who gave his time willingly and generously to students. Besides his expert knowledge and his quiet and compassionate manner, what impressed them most was the fact that this man had experienced what he spoke to them about; he was an eyewitness who had lived --and made-- recent African history.

While filling the demanding role of teacher, Chip also published two articles, spoke extensively to Africanist groups, wrote the first draft of his autobiography and completed all his Ph. D. work with the exception of the concluding chapter of his dissertation. This task would have been completed too, except that the long shadow of Dr. Banda once again fell on him. About to leave for research in London, Chip was cautioned that his presence there would undoubtedly be reported by Malawian students and an effort made to extradite him to face trial. Wisely, he followed the advice, which kept him

out of potential danger but added immeasurable difficulty to his dissertation.

With these many activities and responsibilities it may be wondered how this man managed to find time for that other dimension of his life, the personal one that involved him as husband and father. In fact, his highest priority was the comfort and welfare of his family, for he was a loving man, a sympathetic and compassionate father whose greatest pride was his children and greatest concern their growth as humane and educated persons. To achieve this, no sacrifice was too great and no demand too trivial. He took a keen interest in their schooling, determined that his children should enjoy every advantage; he gave of himself fully, while still maintaining that degree of parental authority and respect that is a mark of an African father.

Everyone who knew this unassuming and reticent man was warmed by his smile, by his charm, courtesy and modesty, and by the gentleness that pervaded his being. Honesty, principle, and integrity were the cornerstones of his personal life and of his political career, and the loss of Masauko Chipembere leaves a void in the lives of those who loved and respected him.

And Africa mourns the loss of a noble son.

Footnote

1. It is anticipated that Chip's autobiography and Ph.D. dissertation will be published posthumously; both will enhance awareness of his life and career as an architect of Malawi independence and add to that country's slim literature. For the purposes of this essay I am relying on the following sources: personal knowledge of various aspects of Chip's life; interviews with his widow Catherine Chipembere and his brother John, and on three articles written by Chip. *My Malawian Ancestors* [Dar es Salaam] (1969); "Malawi in Crisis; 1964," in *Ufahamu* (Fall, 1970); "Malawi's Growing Links With South Africa--A Necessity Or A Virtue?" in *Africa Today* (April, 1971). Also, see Donald Trelford, "Chip Dies in Exile," in *Rand Daily Mail* (Oct. 15, 1975); Chimwene Wanga ["My Brother"], "The Littlest Revolution," in *Africa Today* (April, 1965), and any work dealing with events in south-central Africa since W.W. II, especially Robert I. Rotberg, *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia, 1873-1964* (Harvard University Press, 1965).

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