The Triumph of the Peasant Option and the Parasitic Cotton Sector in Malawi, 1891 to 1995*

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Hofmeester, Karin & Pim de Zwart (eds.), Colonialism, Institutional Change, and Shifts in Global Labour Relations. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018

DOI: 10.5117/9789462984363/CH06

Abstract
Malawi’s colonial and post-colonial governments tried, without success, to create capitalist farmers out of the country’s cotton-growing peasantry. The plan foundered under the weight of low producer prices resulting from high freight rates and systematic transfers of income from the cotton trade into non-peasant enterprises. Villagers were left with no money to specialize in cotton farming, and the industry survived as a smallholder undertaking only because it received the uncompensated labour of dependants and resources from other sectors. Cotton agriculture developed as a parasite, on economic and political grounds. It originated in, and was for a long time sustained by, the silent violence of the colonial tax code: to grow cotton was to venture beyond the boundaries of economic rationality.

Keywords: cotton, new imperialism, peasantry, second colonial occupation, World Bank, World War II

"Reducing it to its essentials the object must be to create a class of professional farmers [and] to encourage the individual, to develop his initiative and to evolve a class of yeoman farmer."

* I am grateful to Dean Miller and Louis Nthenda for their insightful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft and to Clement Ng’ong’ola for permission to use a figure from his dissertation.

1 Kettlewell, An Outline, p. 3.
“And after selling a bag its [sic] never enough for buying a cloth or taxation [but only enough to buy] sweets […] We want to be rich, therefore marketing system should be improved and price raised.”

“The Nyasaland native is conservative by nature and he has been slow to adjust his outlook to changed conditions.”

“It is remarkable that the decline of the European cotton industry or any other agricultural enterprise was tolerable if unremunerative prices were an important factor. Africans, however, were conservative if they showed the same sensitivity to market trends.”

Introduction

The opening quotation captures in a nutshell the determination of colonial officials in Malawi to reshape the country’s agrarian economy; to remake it in such a way that it would be able to subsidize Britain’s reconstruction after World War II. In the second and third quotations, Mr Balandao and the acting governor outline different reasons why such a programme might not work. For Acting Governor K.L. Hall, the challenge lies in Africans’ “natural conservatism”, whereas Mr Balandao, a peasant farmer, signals low producer prices as the potential obstacle. Raised in the context of a small country, Malawi, the two perspectives were to inform much of the debate about Africa’s economic crisis in the 1980s.

Mr Balandao’s criticism reverberates in the scholarly discussion informed by political economy, an approach that has allowed those trained in political science, economics, history, and in several other social sciences to join in the conversation about Africa’s economic challenges. In his reference to prices as a factor in the behaviour of the cotton grower, Mr Balandao seems to have lifted a page from Robert Bates’s influential book, States and Markets in Africa. A unifying theme in political economy is the assumption that the same methods used to understand “successful” economies can

2 Oral Testimony: Balandao, TA Ngabu, Chikwawa District. Recorded by Symforiano Mwendo (SM) in 1996 on behalf of the author. These testimonies will hereafter be referenced as SM96/. Emphasis added by the author.
3 Ng’ong’ola, “Statutory Law”, p. 272.
4 Ibid., p. 272.
5 Among others, see Ravenhill, Africa in Economic Crisis.
6 Bates, Markets and States.
also illuminate the workings of underperforming systems; a very different starting point from that implicit in the acting governor’s explanation. His theory prepares the reader to see Africa as a unique place; as the “other”.

For some scholars, Africa’s uniqueness is a product of its culture, whereas for others, it is its environment. Thus, the same African environment that has given the world and, particularly the West, diamonds, gold, oil, and resources for academic endowments, emerges from the work of many scholars as the principal obstacle to economic development. Eric Jones did not mince his words on this subject, confidently declaring “The defects of the [African] environment [...] did indeed strike so close to the heart of economic life that it is not clear what indigenous developments were possible.”

John Illife clarified the assertion about Africa’s uniqueness, reminding his readers that while the inhabitants of “favoured” climates are heroes for building “civilizations”, Africans “deserve admiration, support, and careful study” for the achievement of bodily survival. They “have been and are the frontiersmen who have colonized an especially hostile [sic] region of the world on behalf of the entire human race. That has been their chief [read “only”] contribution to history.” And, perhaps seeing nothing particularly “salubrious” in the northern climates, some have blamed the same African environment for not being harsh enough to force its inhabitants to invent capitalism. The late Professor Ali Mazrui poetically called this particular deficiency the “winter gap”. In sharp contrast, however, other scholars have looked to African culture to explain the continent’s economic challenges.

Culture surfaces as an independent variable in, for example, discussions about the failure of export production to transform African agriculture. According to one authority, Sarah Berry, “The strategies used to pursue such struggles led to investment not in labour-saving innovations [...] but in the proliferation of patronage relations, as accumulators sought to protect their access to resources and markets by accumulating loyal subordinates.” The processes of commercialization that have led to “development” in other parts of the world have been “compromised” in Africa “by the actions of social networks deeply rooted in African culture.”

7 Jones, The European Miracle, pp. 154-156.
8 Illife, Africans, p. 1.
9 Mazrui, The Africans, pp. 213-236. For among the latest and perhaps most radical versions of this environmental determinism, see Sangmpam, “Why the African Union”.
The argument in this contribution is that there is no need to invoke culture or the environment to explain history in Africa. As elsewhere in the world, in Africa culture and the natural setting become effective historical drivers only when coupled with specific political and economic relationships. The cultural argument ignores, for example, the fact that the ancestors of the farmers, who are supposedly busy acquiring dependents today, spent over three centuries after 1500 exporting their neighbours and relatives. In Malawi, the propensity of African cotton growers and European tea farmers to invest in social relationships was an effect, not a cause, of the fact that they could not afford machines or paid employees on a regular basis. The environment was equally neutral in its effects on the history of cotton farming.

The government’s plans to create cotton-growing capitalist farmers crashed under the weight of low producer prices resulting from high freight rates and systematic transfers of surpluses from the cotton trade into non-peasant initiatives. Villagers were left with little or no money to invest or specialize in cotton farming, and the industry could only survive as a smallholder venture mainly because, unlike capitalists, villagers could pump into it the uncompensated labour of their dependants, and money generated in other sectors. Cotton farming developed as a parasite, on economic and political grounds. It originated in, and until the mid-1990s was sustained by, the silent violence of the country’s tax legislation. European and Asian settlers, working in the same hot and humid Lower Tchiri Valley but free from the oppressive power of the colonial state that otherwise ruled village life, abandoned cotton agriculture in the early 1920s because they could not run it on a rational basis.

The chapter addresses these issues in four parts. The first explores the rise and fall of the government’s plan, from 1891 to 1923, to turn European settlers into capitalist cotton farmers supported by cheap African labour. The second part focuses on the fact that, under the prevailing economic and political conditions, peasants’ success as cotton producers relied simultaneously on their powerlessness vis-à-vis the colonial state and their ability to control the labour of their dependents. The third section examines the dynamics of cotton markets and producer prices. The final part shows how – as a result of stagnation in rural incomes – on the one hand, villagers underutilized technology and wage labour and, on the other, spread their own labour over a wide range of activities, including those needed to keep cotton agriculture alive. The economics and politics of peasant cotton agriculture thus undercut any stirrings towards specialization and the possibility of a new class of “yeoman” farmers.
Cotton and the “new” imperialism

The first British plan to establish a capitalist cotton economy based on the division between European owners of capital and African wage earners foundered, partly because of high freight costs, but mainly because the settlers could not secure labour cheaply enough to offset the disadvantages of the primitive transport system.

Coming at the height of the “new” imperialism, as they did elsewhere in Africa at the time, in 1891 the British annexed Malawi (also known as “British Central Africa” and “Nyasaland” from respectively 1891 to 1907 and 1907 to 1964) with two main objectives. The new territory was to export to the British Empire minerals, foodstuffs, “big fix” items (such as coffee, tea, and tobacco), and raw materials, particularly cotton. Malawi would in turn become a destination for British manufactures and British capital, the distinctly “new” feature of the imperialism of the period. This was a double-sided mission, some parts of which proved easier to accomplish than others.

With knowledge gleaned from missionaries and traders who had worked in the region since 1875, the colonial regime ruled out the possibility of developing a mining industry in the country.12 The colony was to contribute to the wealth of Britain mainly as an exporter of agricultural products. Known as “economic” crops, all of these were initially to be grown in the Tchiri Highlands, where the climate was “healthy” enough for European settlers. However, after a few seasons of trials, it became obvious that although suitable for most crops, the Tchiri Highlands could not support cotton; cotton could only prosper in the humid and hot Lakeshore districts and the Lower Tchiri Valley: the focus of this chapter.

Long before identifying the locations for the different “economic” crops, officials had already determined the “appropriate” division of labour for the country. Given the absence of exploitable mineral resources, British investment in this country would be directed towards agriculture. European settlers were therefore to monopolize “economic” crops, with Africans contributing nothing to this privileged sector of the economy apart from their labour. Thus, when not working on European estates, villagers were to limit their agricultural activities to the cultivation of food crops, including maize, which would feed the Africans employed by Europeans. Governor George Smith was beholden to this division of labour as late as 1920: “I feel […] it is to the European and European capital that we must look for any

considerable and rapid expansion in the growth of cotton in Nyasaland, the native continuing in a large degree to fund the labour.”

The state and its European allies fought to the end to maintain this division of labour, which quickly assumed the character of a natural given. The government’s resolve to make this plan work encountered many challenges, the most significant of which was its own failure to invest in a transportation system efficient enough to move the country’s exports and imports. Head porterage was still a common method of moving commodities in Malawi when Governor Smith was declaring his commitment to the cause of British finance capital in 1920. Further, freight rates on the privately built railway system that replaced head carriers proved to be higher than on any of the other systems in the region, all of which were publicly financed. Not many entrepreneurs with resources looked to Malawi to start a business; they went to other British territories with better facilities. Only those with fewer options trekked to Malawi, attracted by news of cheap land and cheap labour. They would launch undercapitalized enterprises, relying on the hoe as their principal instrument of production, and offering poor working conditions and obscenely low wages. Africans did everything to avoid these labour camps and, through that process, turned the state into a labour-recruitment agent.

To meet the needs of its “investors”, the government devised a labour tenancy system, known as thangata, which reduced to perpetual dependence those Africans who were on the land both before and after its seizure by the settlers. (These settlers saw the value of dependent workers without learning anything about African “culture”; indeed many despised it.) However, thangata became a useful tool of labour recruitment only on the Tchiri Highlands, where the expropriation of land and influx of immigrants from Portuguese-controlled Mozambique exacerbated the pre-existing high population densities. Refugees from Portuguese oppression underwrote the success of tea, tobacco, and coffee estates in the Tchiri Highlands. Thangata did not, however, work as planned in areas that, like the Lower Tchiri Valley, did not receive such an influx of refugees. To satisfy the labour requirements of European enterprises throughout the country, the colonial state complemented thangata with tax legislation.

Within ten years of assuming control of the country, the British had passed three pieces of tax legislation intended not only to raise revenue, but also to drive labour to European enterprises. In 1891, the government imposed

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13 Governor Smith to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 16 August 1920, Si/557/20, Malawi National Archives [hereafter MNA]. See also Mandala, “Feeding and Fleecing”.
a six-shilling poll tax on every adult male, and making any male fourteen years and older qualify as an adult. Three years later, in 1894, the government responded to protests by chiefs and missionaries about the high tax rate, by altering the unit of taxation from the poll to what was termed the “hut tax”, and setting this tax at three shillings per year. However, continuing labour shortages forced the government to revise the tax code again in 1901, when the tax rate was quadrupled from three to twelve shillings per year and, even more tellingly, when officials introduced a rebate system allowing anyone who worked for a European for at least one month in a year to pay only half the maximum payable tax. Tax collection would turn into tax wars.

Unsure of their loyalties, the government relieved chiefs of their original responsibility as tax collectors during the annual tax campaigns. A European official, often the district administrator, who was now appropriately called the “collector”, led the campaign. The expeditions would often turn violent during the two-month period between 31 December – when each year’s taxes were payable – and 1 March. Tax offenders apprehended during the raids were not, however, sent to prison. Instead, they were “marched down hundreds of miles” from their homes to European enterprises on the Tchiri Highlands. Then, the houses of defaulters who managed to escape the collector were declared government property and subject to demolition. Sometimes whole “villages were burned down if chiefs or ordinary people raised the slightest demur”. The tax wars brought home to the colonized the inherent violence of imperialism.

Malawians sometimes responded with violence to the organized violence of the state, as in 1915, when the anguish of those dispossessed of their land and forced to work on European estates in the Tchiri Highlands became the driving force behind the Chilembwe Uprising that sought to forcefully expel the British from the country. However, even after the defeat of the uprising, Malawians continued to resist, only this time employing the less spectacular but equally effective “weapons of the weak”. At the same time that the violence of Portuguese rule in Mozambique flooded the Tchiri Highlands with desperate fugitives, thousands of able-bodied males – in a clear rebuke to the country’s labour regime – headed to the mines of South Africa. This was the typical response in the northern part of the country.

15 Sir Harry Johnston, Report on the First Three Years; Johnston to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 22 January 1894; FO2/66, Public Record Office, British National Archives.
16 Pachai, Malawi, pp. 110-144
17 Ibid., p. 112
18 Shepperson and Price, Independent African; Mwase, Strike a Blow.
19 Pachai, Malawi, pp. 119-127.
In the Lower Tchiri Valley, villagers resisted working on the European and Indian cotton estates by trying to grow their own cotton.

African cotton producers entered the archival records for the first time when they sold their product to Europeans, including in all likelihood some struggling European cotton farmers who were eager to make money by any means. News about these “hidden” transactions must have reached J.S.J. McCall, who arrived in Nyasaland in 1909, charged with the responsibility of establishing a Department of Agriculture. It speaks volumes about the department’s financial capacity that even though committed to dependence on agriculture, it took Malawi two decades to establish this department.

Appalled by what he saw of European farms, with many overgrown by weeds due to lack of labour, McCall successfully lobbied for the passage of probably the first agricultural ordinance in the country, allowing African growers to pay their hut tax in cotton. Any head of household who produced thirty-six pounds (in the valley) or forty-two pounds (elsewhere in the country) of seed cotton and sold it to a European was entitled to a three-shilling tax rebate, the same as if they had worked one month in European employment.20 The colonial regime’s commitment to the cause of the metropolitan textile industry did not exclude, in principle, an alliance with a productive peasantry.

Villagers seized the opportunity to work for themselves, and increased their cotton output every year after 1912. The partial collapse of the cotton trade during World War I proved to be only a temporary setback. Villagers redoubled their efforts and began to overtake settler production soon after the war. Several seasons of brilliant performance by the peasant sector undermined the government’s support for the estate sector. Thus, after witnessing failing cotton estates in 1923, the Director of Agriculture removed the Lower Tchiri Valley from the list of areas to be “developed” by European enterprise. The capitalist route had reached a dead end:

In future the Lower Shire District (and parts of the Chikwawa District) should be regarded mainly as a Reserve for Natives and that Europeans or Asiatics should not be allowed to acquire further tracts of land except in very special circumstances [...] European efforts to develop this area of the Protectorate have been conspicuously unsuccessful.21


This was a courageous move on the part of the director; even though the last statement conveys the impression that European efforts to “develop” the colony through capitalist cotton agriculture had done well in other parts of the country (they had not). The plan failed in the Lakeshore region for the same economic reasons as it did in the Lower Tchiri Valley.

The Lower Tchiri Valley and the Lakeshore region were by nature the most suitable cotton-growing areas; both had grown cotton before colonial rule and would do so after colonialism under non-capitalist regimes of labour control. The capitalist experiment failed, partly because of the high freight rates on the country’s primitive transportation network – as we shall see in section three of this chapter – but mainly because of rural resistance to wage employment on the undercapitalized farms. The end was also dramatic because Europeans were politically free to abandon undertakings that did not make economic sense. African farmers did not enjoy such freedom. They could not avoid both wage labour and cotton farming and remain British subjects, colonial power underwrote their cotton-growing activities, which verged on the margins of irrationality.

The collapse of the settler economy also shows that colonial officials could promote the interests of the metropolitan textile industry without at the same time serving the demands of finance capital. The two forms of capital could be separated. As in West Africa, colonial officials in Malawi came to serve the needs of Manchester through an alliance with the peasantry, an alliance that would moreover relieve officials from the politically risky task of labour recruitment.

State power and the authority of village elders

By the early 1920s, villagers had sabotaged not only the plantation cotton regime but also the earliest attempts by the colonial government to impose its own cotton-growing rules. There were limits to state power. Villagers did not follow the government’s cotton-growing blueprint, but developed their own strategies to accommodate cotton within the existing systems of food production. These strategies proved so successful in delivering cotton that the government gave up its feeble attempts at intervention. However, in a colonial world in which cotton growing was also determined by political power, the successes of peasants’ initiatives came at a price. Cotton farming exacerbated the plight of the youth, while exposing the food economy to new threats. Victories and setbacks were not always far from each other in the world of the colonized.
Still exercising their partial independence as producers, villagers quietly ignored the government’s cultivation blueprint that had accompanied the tax rebate regime, which allowed African growers to pay their hut tax in cotton. The blueprint required growers to raise cotton in its own separate field. I will refer to this method either as “pure” cotton culture or the “two-field” system; two, because cotton growers also continued to raise their own food crops. Afraid that the rules would place cotton cultivation in sharp conflict with the land and labour requirements of food cultivation, villagers invented two techniques to accommodate the cash crop.

For the first, peasants grew cotton on mphala drylands, where cultivation depended on rainfall. People planted cotton in the same field as, but immediately after harvesting, the early ripening varieties of maize, millet, and sorghum. In this way, villagers treated cotton the same way as they did their “secondary” crops, such as sweet potatoes and pigeon peas. Officials sometimes referred to such cotton as “late-planted cotton”, because the cash crop followed the harvesting of major food crops. This is intra-seasonal rotation. The second technique also represented an adaptation of existing practice. In this method, villagers accommodated cotton by adjusting intercropping, a popular strategy some have called the jewel of peasant science in Africa. Under this regime, villagers raised cotton in the same field – and at the same time – as their maize, sweet potatoes, beans, and other food crops. Each area reproduced the biological diversity of the natural world. Moreover, villagers interplanted cotton with food crops not only on the mphala drylands as they did in intra-seasonal rotation, but also on the dambo floodplains bordering the Tchiri River.

Because Malawi’s popular cotton varieties during the colonial era were slow maturing, requiring at least five months to ripen, the possibility of raising cotton on the dambo floodplains, which was flooded every year, was influenced by the Tchiri River’s flooding patterns. The river levels had started to drop in the mid-1880s, largely following a similar trend in Lake Malawi, which is the source of the Tchiri. The drop in the river’s levels shortened the flood season, making it possible from about 1900 for villagers to grow the slow-maturing cotton in addition to fast-ripening food crops, such as maize and sweet potatoes, on dambo floodplains. They would sow cotton seeds at the

22 Port Herald District Annual Report, 1932, St/43A/33; J.S.J. McCall, Director of Agriculture [hereafter, DA], 1910, A2/1/4, MNA.
same times as their food crops, at the end of the flood season around June, and harvest the cash crop before the beginning of the flood season in December.

The competent use of the dambo floodplains and mphala drylands helped the Lower Tchiri Valley to emerge by the 1930s as the leading cotton-growing region in the country, which already had two major consequences. First, officials quickly dropped the original plan to force villagers to raise cotton in separate fields from food crops. Some even went so far as to admit the rationality of peasants’ agricultural science: “The native methods of cotton cultivation”, wrote the district commissioner for Nsanje in 1933, “appear to suit the Lower River conditions better than the methods employed on the experimental station judging by the yield per acre obtained from both”. Peasants were thus able to organize their labour without outside interference. The second consequence was the region’s emergence with a clean tax-payment record by the mid-1920s. Cotton growers made payment of the hut tax the first priority for money from cotton sales, and in that way removed the Lower Tchiri Valley from the list of places to be terrorized during the annual tax raids. The villagers had scored significant victories, but these came with significant losses for some sectors of the economy and some sections of the community, particularly those who had been powerless before colonialism.

The victories were possible mainly because heads of households were able to extract more labour than before from their male and female social juniors. With most of their income spent on taxes, elders were left with little or no money to pay regular wage labourers or invest in new technologies such as the plough. To meet the extra labour demands of the cash crop, they manipulated institutions such as marriage in order to keep youth labour in cotton agriculture. The initial impact of colonialism was not, as is often claimed, to liberate people from archaic family patterns of power.

The rise of export production in Malawi intensified the exploitation of those who were at the bottom of traditional society. Youth labour filled the gap between what merchants paid and what was socially necessary to raise cotton. Social juniors were the first to subsidize a parasitic sector that could not survive on its earnings and the dynamic of this process lay in the silent violence of British imperial control. Those, such as European settlers, who were not subject to such political violence did not turn their children into a

24 Production per Head of Export Crops, 1925, A3/2/233; BCGA Local Manager to DA, 19 January 1926, A3/2/38, MNA.
25 Port Herald District Annual Report, 1933, NSP2/1/4, MNA.
26 Chikwawa District Annual Report, 1929, NSC2/1/3, MNA.
27 Chikwawa District Annual Reports, 1934, St/88B/35; 1935, St/79A/36, MNA; See South African General Mission (known today as African Evangelical Church), South African Pioneer, 45 (October
free resource and did not therefore succeed as cotton farmers. Extra-economic pressure generated another contradiction: the same methods of cultivation villagers adopted to protect the food economy ended up harming it.

For example, to grow late-planted cotton on the *mphala* drylands, villagers had to abandon slow-maturing varieties of sorghum that could not fit into the cotton-growing schedule. However, this strategy had the effect of undermining food security. The late-maturing sorghums also happened to be the most drought-resilient food crops in this region of irregular and low rainfall. Droughts assumed a new meaning. 28 Even more significant for the theme of this study were the contradictions of intercropping cotton with food crops on the *dambo* floodplains. To interplant cotton with food crops, villagers had to forego the possibility of several, consecutive maize cultures within a single growing season. This was a historic compromise, however, one that had little to do with the natural environment and everything to do with the organization of society.

In a powerful reminder that while offering opportunities, nature does not tell people what to do with their resources, the peasants in the northern or Chikwawa District exploited the same fertile *dambo* floodplains in a different way to those in the southern or Nsanje District. The system of intercropping cotton with food crops on the *dambo* floodplain described in the preceding pages was dominant only in the Nsanje District. In Chikwawa, villagers used the same fertile *dambo* to grow several successive maize crops during the same season. Economics determined the differing approaches. Unlike their neighbours in Nsanje, peasants in Chikwawa had a ready market for their maize in the neighbouring townships of Blantyre and Limbe, and they could use money from maize sales to pay their taxes. Those who grew cotton in Chikwawa raised the cash crop on the less-fertile *mphala* drylands. 29

The differing use of the *dambo* in the Chikwawa and Nsanje Districts stands as a warning against reading the history of cotton agriculture in the Lower Tchiri Valley as a mere reflex reaction to the environment, particularly the Tchiri River. It was not. It was not so much the river, as the changing character of British imperialism, which determined the nature

1932), p. 127; 46 (August-September 1933); Port Herald District Annual Report, 1935, S1/79A/36, MNA.
29 Chikwawa District Annual Reports (Agriculture) 1952-1953 (1DCCK2/2/5); 1963-1965 (3.6.10R/16559, file Ag 3; Chikwawa District Monthly Reports (Agriculture), October 1955 (1DCCK2/2/5), MNA.
of state intervention before and after World War II. As elsewhere in Africa, the colonial government in Malawi did not have the drive or resources to forcefully intervene in production before World War II. That situation changed after the war, when even the deficit-ridden colonial government in Malawi answered the call for colonies to bail out the devastated metropolitan economies. The Tchiri River region merely amplified global trends in both periods.

The second colonial occupation

The decline in cotton output, resulting from the permanent inundation of the marshes that started with the Bomani Deluge of 1939, strengthened the hand of the country’s interventionists against the backdrop of a global campaign to make the colonized help to pay for the reconstruction of Europe after World War II. Colonial governments were now charged with the mission to extend their control of agriculture beyond the market and into the sphere of production. To do this, officials in Malawi passed the landmark agricultural legislation of 1951 that addressed both the social and technical conditions of peasant production.30 The implementation of this legislation placed the country on the same type of war footing as the tax campaigns of the early colonial era had done. The resulting resistance killed some but not all agricultural projects, and those that survived did so by raising the costs of production and, just as important, by sharpening peasants’ awareness of those costs.

The technical component of the legislation of 1951 was two-sided. One part addressed general problems – such as soil erosion – that supposedly affected all farmers, regardless of whether or not they were engaged in export production. The other component dealt with the challenges facing mundu (dry-land) cotton growers, particularly cotton pests. The legislation required peasants to uproot all cotton plants on the dry-lands by 31 July, burn them by 15 August, and plant new seeds in a field separate from food crops at the time of the first rains.31 Cotton was to be given as much attention as food cultivation, if not more. The two-field programme that villagers had successfully fought against at the beginning of the cotton era was back on the colonial agenda.

31 Chikwawa Cotton Development Project [hereafter CCDP], Project Manager (J.M. Hall) to Agricultural Extension Staff, 1, 28 August 1972 (14.1.2F/40365), MNA.
Rural responses to the above measures were different in the two districts of the Lower Tchiri Valley; the Chikwawa (or northern) and Nsanje (or southern) districts. Resistance was fiercest in the more densely populated Nsanje District where, after losing the *dambo* marshes to cotton cultivation, peasants were eager to utilize the *mphala* drylands more carefully for food production. With little or no land to devote to the two-field system, and eager to restore the drought-resilient sorghums they had abandoned at the beginning of the cotton era, the villagers responded to the government’s betterment programme on two fronts. Merging their protest with the national movement for political independence, most stopped growing cotton. Nsanje thus entered the post-colonial era as a diversified economy, featuring a dying cotton agriculture that competed with the more vigorous cattle keeping, fishing, and especially labour migration. The sparsely populated Chikwawa District became the new centre of the cotton economy in the country. The African-controlled government would launch the second agricultural campaign against cotton pests in that district.

The second campaign was more successful. For one thing, there was enough room in the Chikwawa District for people to practise the two-field system. However, even more significant was the altered political context. Resistance to the government’s betterment programmes during the 1950s had been part of the struggle against British rule. The attainment of political independence in 1964 changed the balance of forces. African leaders were now in charge of the campaign, which they presented as part of their larger scheme to “develop” the country, although their ideas about the role of cotton in the economy did not differ from those of the British.

Thus, after securing the support of the World Bank, the new government launched the “Chikwawa Cotton Development Project” (CCDP) in 1968. Then, from 1973 – as the project expanded its stated mission to include other crops as well as cotton, and also incorporated the Nsanje District – the CCDP came to be known as the “Lower Shire Valley Agricultural Development Project” (SVADP) or “Project” for short, the terms used throughout this chapter to refer to the project both before and after 1973. The project was considered to have entered the era of so-called “integrated” development after 1973, but that was only on paper. Cotton growing in the Chikwawa District continued to dominate the organization and logic of the project, with one difference: instead of only requiring villagers to adopt the two-field system, SVADP officials also promoted spray technology.

The spray technology probably did not reduce the incidence of cotton pests, but it certainly helped to promote the cause of the two-field system, both directly and indirectly. It popularized the system directly when
growers were required to adopt the regime in order to qualify for agricultural loans from the Project, as cultivators needed the loans to procure sprayers and pesticides. Indirectly, the spray technology helped propagate the two-field system because while trusting its effectiveness in the fight against cotton pests, villagers were also afraid of contaminating their food with pesticides. The result was a general adoption of the two-field system among Chikwawa’s cotton growers, many of whom hoped to turn cotton farming into a profitable business. As Mrs Enifa Kwenje enthusiastically told my research assistant in the presence of two other ladies:

In *munda* [dry-land] farming, we grow cotton in its own garden; maize in its own garden; sorghum in its own garden [...] this is modern agriculture, not the traditional method, when they used to mix cotton with maize, groundnuts, and other food crops. Nowadays we follow the advice of agricultural instructors who are dead against intercropping and tell us never to mix crops [...] we raise each crop in its own field, be it cotton, maize, sorghum [...] millet.32

These villagers were rural innovators, ready to assume new risks in production. Most farmers today grow cotton as a pure culture in three alternative ways. Some separate cotton from food crops by alternating rows in the same field, some divide the same field into sections of cotton and of food crops, but most growers in the sparsely populated portions of the Chikwawa District raise the cash crop in its own field away from their food crops. In addition to the availability of land, the variations also reflect a household’s labour and financial resources.

Although a major victory for agricultural interventionists in the post-World War II era, the two-field system and spray technology imposed a significant financial burden on rural innovators. The technology was expensive, which was particularly true of the pesticides. According to one survey, on average, pesticides in the mid-1980s consumed about 27 per cent of the annual income of cotton farmers who owned and used their own spraying machines; the corresponding figure among farmers who also borrowed or rented the spraying machines from the rich was 33 per cent.33

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32 Mrs Enifa Kwenje, Mrs Atafinu Petulo, Magret Jimu Mpheka, Tomali Village, TA Lundu, Chikwawa, 12 June 1996, SM96/16.
33 These figures are based on the following information: (1) Every sprayed acre among sprayer-owning and sprayer-borrowing farmers yielded 359 lbs. and 432 lbs., respectively (the corresponding yield among non-sprayers was 210 lbs.); Shire Valley Agricultural Development Project [hereafter SVADP], Cotton Survey, 1974/75, 49. (2) In 1983-1984, the credit price for a
High-tech agriculture was also financially onerous because the SVADP did not subsidize the new technology; it only offered loans on which it moreover levied a 10 per cent interest charge.\textsuperscript{34} The new cotton regime fostered rural indebtedness.

From October to December 1970, 1,250 farmers applied for loans to buy sprayers, and the project’s Loans Committee approved 1,178 and turned down 72 of those applications.\textsuperscript{35} Another survey concluded that during the first phase of the Project, from 1968 to 1973, peasants borrowed approximately 636,877 Malawian kwacha (MWK) (around $700,000) for sprayers and pesticides.\textsuperscript{36} Poor growers, whose applications were rejected under the project’s stringent eligibility requirements, ended up borrowing money and/or technology from the wealthy who, by paying with cash, could buy it at a 10 per cent discount. The poor fell victim to money lenders, also because of the high labour demands of the new cotton regime.

Already labour-intensive even before World War II, when most growers intercropped cotton with their food crops in the marshes, the two-field system pushed household labour to its limits. Peasants needed to repeat in their cotton field nearly every major operation they performed in food production: garden preparation, burning of old stalks, sowing, weeding, and harvesting. While some operations, such as harvesting, were one-time procedures, others demanded the farmers’ attention several times in each growing season. For example, peasants weeded their fields at least three times per growing season.\textsuperscript{37} Spraying was even more repetitive and labour consuming.

Villagers were expected to spray their cotton at least twelve times in a growing season.\textsuperscript{38} Farmers began each round of spraying by mixing complete package of pesticides for 0.4 hectare (0.98 acres) was in Malawi kwacha [hereafter MWK] 22.75 (Ngabu Agricultural Development Division [hereafter NADD], “Historical Statistics”, March 1984, Item 14), and in that year the price of 1 kilogram of first-grade cotton was 42 tambala (or 19 tambala per lb.): see ibid., Item 13. (3) Lastly, the calculation assumes that all the cotton was first grade (which obviously it was not) among the two categories of spraying farmers (1983–1984); CCDP, Project Manager (J.M. Hall) to DC Chikwawa, Members and Chairman Liaison Committee, 11 May 1971 (14.1.2F/40365), CCDP, Monthly Reports, December 1970 (14.1.2F/40364), MNA. 34 NADD, “Historical Statistics” (March 1984, Item 14), MNA. 35 CCDP, Monthly Reports, December 1970 (14.1.2F/40364), MNA. 36 CCDP, Monthly Reports, March 1974 (14.1.2F/40364), MNA. 37 Some villagers also thinned (kuzulira, kutengula, kupambula) their cotton during the initial phase in weeding: SM96/2, 13, 14, 17; CCDP, Monthly Reports, January 1971 (14.1.2F/40364), MNA. 38 SVADP, Monthly Advice (February 1975), pp. 3, 582; see also ibid. (January, April 1974), pp. 31, 417. For similar struggles against cotton pests in the Old South, see Carter, An Hour Before Daylight, pp. 179–180. Thanks to Dr Karen Fields for directing my attention to this important and fascinating account of rural life in the Old South.
pesticides with water, often drawn a long way from the fields. They sprayed while walking at a specified pace in relation to the direction of the wind. After spraying the entire field, they cleaned and stored knapsacks and other tools ready for the next round, during which they would follow the same procedure except that the pesticides would change according to the age of the cotton crop. Spraying thus clashed with other farming operations, exaggerated the conflict between cotton and food, and encouraged the employment of extra-household labour.

According to one survey, during the 1971 to 1972 growing season, 88 per cent of “Type II” or “progressive” farmers – those who were supposedly becoming “yeoman” farmers – and 54 per cent of “Type I” or “traditional” cotton growers employed extra-household labour at some point during the season. About seven years later, in 1979, it was reported that the region’s cotton growers spent a total of MWK 714,000 (about $585,480) on wages. Data also shows that a greater portion of the labour costs relate to casual or temporary workers, because even progressive farmers did not have the means to engage wage labourers on a regular basis. Regardless of the predominance of casual over regular wage earners, the labour costs and the expenditure for the spray technology combined to raise the expense of cotton agriculture, as well as the rural awareness of those costs.

Stagnant incomes from cotton

Rural incomes from cotton remained stagnant during the last three decades of the twentieth century, partly as a result of national policies and pressures that are documented in this section, and partly in response to fluctuations in world prices for the country’s cotton; a subject that needs further investigation. The results of a survey I launched in 2014 to determine peasants’ expenditures on cotton growing are not yet available. However, a combination of data used in the previous section (Table 6.1) and peasants’ reports in the following pages, point to a widening gap between the costs and the rewards of cotton agriculture during the period under discussion.

As a result, perhaps, of their willingness to assume significant risks in production, peasants became very critical of the cotton market. Their grievances against the cotton buyer fall into three groups. First, villagers contended that cotton prices had not kept up with the rising cost of

39 CCDP, “Farm Survey, 1971/72”, Table H8a, MNA.
40 NADD, “Garden Survey”, Table 2.13, MNA.
consumer goods. Headman Mafale of the Chikwawa District could not hide his frustration with producer prices when he addressed a public meeting attended by the leaders of the Malawi Congress Party in 1967:

My fellow friends and I are pleased of this sort of meeting and the speech of the Minister. From the time cotton was introduced in the country the price per lb. was in accordance with the economy of the country and all other things on sale in Malawi. For example it was a penny per lb. and at the same time things in stores and anywhere were also very cheap. A person could buy a 2/- shirt. Why then does the Government not raise price of cotton per lb. since the standard of living has gone high and everything is also very high, we are tired of 6d. per lb. of our cotton?21

Even though there is no data on consumer prices, Mafale’s contention makes sense in view of the dominant trend in cotton prices, as represented in Table 6.1 below.

The second complaint contrasts income from cotton with the prices of the spray technology:

But we have only one major complaint, only one. You may grow and harvest a lot of cotton. But look at the prices they offer; only MWK4.50 [per kilo], which always comes as a surprise. No one expects such a [low] rate. People expect ten, eight, or fifteen [kwacha per kilogram], but we would always get MWK4.50 instead. And this would come after we had taken loans [to buy pesticides] at something like MWK750 per pack or bottle [...] Those who have many acres borrow up to four thousand, five thousand, and six thousand Kwacha.42

Statistical evidence presented in the foregoing section confirms the general sentiment conveyed by the above anecdotes. During the early 1980s, villagers spent between 27 and 33 per cent of their income from cotton on pesticides.43

42 Bonjesi Binzi Namizinga, J.V. Ngulu, Mandere Village, TA Ngabu, Chikwawa, 25 May 1996 (SM96/10). The same complaint was voiced by Village Headman Daison House, Willasi Kacholola, David Nsabwe, Mbaenderana Village, TA Kasisi, Chikwawa, 17 May 1996 (SM96/4).
43 Calculation is based on figures found in SVADP, Cotton Survey, 1974/75, 49; NADD, “Historical Statistics”, [March 1984] Item 14 CCDP, Project Manager (J.M. Hall) to DC Chikwawa,
The third source of growers’ dissatisfaction was indebtedness. This was a new form of indebtedness villagers incurred in their pursuit of spray technology, as was pointed out in the foregoing section. In 2002, villagers brought this issue to the attention of officials from the government and the country’s textile industry during a campaign to revive cotton:

During the meeting farmers alleged that major cotton buyers, ADMARC and Great Lakes, are exploiting them by offering low prices, saying there are no profits gained from their sales. The farmers also said they spend all the money realized from cotton sales in settling debts which they get from money lending institutions at high interest rates. This is what leads to the collapse of the farming industry, they said.44

The campaign could not succeed without raising producer prices, officials were told. Another grower had expressed a similar frustration in 1996: “How can people pay back the money they owe when they received only MWK4.50 [per kilo]? How can we pay back our loans?”45

The current study treats the above criticisms seriously because, if nothing else, they indicate the level of the villagers’ willingness to invest in the cotton enterprise. It is therefore unfortunate that the current study has not completed collecting data either on peasants’ expenditures or on world cotton prices for the country’s cotton during the period under investigation. However, the figures on producer prices between 1950 and 1995, which are detailed in Table 6.1, show that the villagers’ criticisms were well founded.

Table 6.1  Price per kilogram of first grade cotton in British, Malawi, and US currencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exchange rates</th>
<th>Prices (current)</th>
<th>Prices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>£=US$  MKW=US$</td>
<td>Pence (£)</td>
<td>MWK Cents (US$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Members, and Chairman Liaison Committee, 11 May 1971 (14.1.2F/40365), CCDP, Monthly Reports, December 1970 (14.1.2F/40364), MNA.
44  “Farmers Revive Cotton Growing”, MNA.
45  Bonjesi Binzi Namizinga and J.V. Ngalu, Mandere Village, TA Ngabu, Chikwawa, 25 May 1996 (SM96/10). The same complaint was voiced by Daison House (VH), Willasi Kacholola, David Nsabwe, Mbaenderana Village, TA Kasisi, Chikwawa, 17 May 1996 (SM96/4).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exchange rates</th>
<th>Prices (current)</th>
<th>Prices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>£=US$</td>
<td>MWK=US$</td>
<td>Pence (£)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
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<td></td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>2.80</td>
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<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>2.80</td>
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<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1.25</td>
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<td>12.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td></td>
<td>12.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td></td>
<td>15.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td></td>
<td>17.6</td>
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<td>1976</td>
<td>1.09</td>
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<td>18.7</td>
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<td>23.1</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>1.23</td>
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<td>23.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td></td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td>42.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: (1) The original figures are in pounds (lb), converted to kilograms by multiplying by 2.2. Columns 2 and 3 represent the original figures in British pounds (£) and Malawi kwacha (MWK), respectively. I have converted British pounds into US dollars directly using data provided by the Pacific Exchange Rate Service at http://fx.sauder.ubc.ca. I have used a variety of sources, including my own memory, to convert the Malawian kwacha into US dollars. Original figures can be found in Nyasaland Government, Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture for 1950 (p. 10), 1951 (p. 10), 1952 (p. 6), 1955 (p. 11), 1957 (p. 7), 1958 (p. 10), 1959 (p. 10), 1960 (p. 9); The Agricultural Meeting Called and Conveyed [sic] by Malawi Congress Party Leaders in Lower Shire on 29th December, 1967”, Cotton File (17.16.2R/40370, Agr.5); District Commissioner (Chikwawa) to All Chiefs (Chikwawa), 24 April 1970 (17.16.2R/40370, file Agr.5/162); SVADP, Monthly Advice (January 1975), 574; NADD, Historical Statistics” (March 1984), Item 13 (for the years 1972-1984), MNA. Bonjesi Binzi Namizinga, J.V. Ngalu, Mandere Village, TA Ngabu, Chikwawa, 25 May 1996 (SM96/10).

The table of producer prices reflects, in broad terms, trends in world commodity prices immediately following World War II. The spike in Malawi’s cotton prices at the beginning and end of the 1950s mirrored Europe’s growing demand for African products during the era of reconstruction. Similarly, the drop in real prices in the early 1970s echoes the worldwide plunge in commodity prices at the end of the reconstruction era in Western Europe. However, even though this researcher does not yet know the prices that the country’s cotton fetched on the world market, it is clear from other sources that Table 6.1...
also tells the story of a particular country’s experiences of fluctuations in global prices. In addition to the continuing weight of extra-economic pressures, direct and indirect forces help to explain the sharpness of the decline in rural incomes in 1971 and their relative stagnation after that date.

One group of economic pressures takes the reader to the origins of the area that would become Malawi in 1964. When it annexed the territory in 1891, London had little interest in it. The annexation was done reluctantly, and mainly to appease Scottish nationalists. Scottish missionaries and traders, who had settled in the area after 1875 as a tribute to their national hero, Dr David Livingstone, did not want to come under Portuguese rule or John Cecil Rhodes’ British South Africa Company. They instead clamoured for Her Majesty’s protection and, through their allies in the House of Commons, pressured the British government until the Foreign Office appointed Sir Harry Johnston in 1891 as the Protectorate’s first High Commissioner (future governor). However, as if to signal their lack of enthusiasm for this particular imperialist venture, the British Treasury reputedly gave Johnston a mere £20,000 to establish and run the Protectorate for the three years from 1891 to 1893.46 The small community of Scots in the Protectorate got their “new Scotland”, with its own capital of Blantyre, but the Africans would pay a heavy price. The country started with a budget deficit it has never been able to close to this day, with two immediate consequences for the story of cotton agriculture.

First, the British and their African successors taxed everything they could lay their hands on, and cotton became an easy target. Second, the government had no resources to build an efficient and affordable transportation system.47 Head porterage was still a common means of moving the country’s exports and imports during the interwar period, and without sufficient funds, the government turned to private enterprise to build the country’s railway system. Malawi’s was the only privately financed railway system in the region and, as expected, it proved to be the most expensive. Freight charges on this system were higher than those on the publicly financed railways of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and Uganda. Peasants paid for

46 As a result, the protectorate began as an aid-dependent country. Sir Harry Johnston financed his young administration and its wars of “pacification” with money from John Cecil Rhodes’s British South Africa Company. Between 1891 and 1895, the company provided the government an annual subsidy of £17,500 and received, in return, the “right to acquire […] concessions of land and minerals both within and without the protectorate.” (Pachai, Malawi, pp. 82, 57, 77). With its large tracts of prime land, the Chartered Company became a key player in the country’s economic development and policies.

the high transport costs. According to one estimate, Malawi’s railways absorbed 40.66 per cent of the money that cotton growers at Chiromo market would have received for their product in 1930.\textsuperscript{48} Merchants always referred to the high freight rates when resisting any increase in producer prices.\textsuperscript{49}

While the transportation hurdles affected both peasant and capitalist producers, other pressures were specifically designed to depress the incomes of peasant growers, a policy that held true during both the colonial and post-colonial eras.

According to Dr Clement Ng’ong’ola, who is my principal authority on statutory law affecting agriculture in Malawi and the author of the fourth quotation opening this chapter, the country’s marketing system, during both the colonial and post-colonial periods, distinguished between those crops raised by Africans on “Customary” (public) land and those grown on private land, owned or leased by Europeans and Asians during the colonial era, and by tobacco-growing African politicians and their associates after independence.\textsuperscript{50} Leaseholders sold their coffee, tea, and flue-cured tobacco by auction at the prevailing world prices. By contrast, the government deployed a barrage of ordinances to govern the sale of peasant-grown groundnuts, maize, rice, and especially the more lucrative cotton and fire-cured tobacco crops.

The legislation was intended to accomplish three related objectives. The first was to stifle and drive out competition from the markets of peasant produce. Thus, after a few years during which the cotton market was open to European as well as Indian buyers, the British Cotton Growers Association (BCGA) won the right to act as the country’s sole buyer of peasant-grown cotton in 1923.\textsuperscript{51} The Association lost this monopsony at the end of the Great Depression, but that did not lead to an open market. After a short interval, when the state itself purchased cotton directly and through individuals appointed as its agents, came the marketing boards in the period after World War II. There were initially crop-specific boards, such as the Cotton

\textsuperscript{48} BCGA Manager, The Native Cotton Industry, Nyasaland, 1931, A3/2/56, MNA. The subsequent liberation and civil wars in Mozambique between the late 1960s and early 1990s only worsened the situation for Malawi’s exporters, who had to send their goods through Tanzanian and South African (through Zambia and Zimbabwe) ports.

\textsuperscript{49} See, for example, BCGA to DA, 19 April 1911 (A1/1/2); BCGA to [?], 3 December 1912 (A1/1/3); Acting Chief Secretary to BCGA, 3 January 1913 (A1/1/4); BCGA to DA, 26 April 1934 (A3/2/53); Director, Liverpool-Uganda Cotton Company, to Chief Secretary, 7 June 1934 (S1/269/34), MNA.

\textsuperscript{50} Ng’ong’ola, “Statutory Law”.

\textsuperscript{51} Agreement with the BCGA, 1922, A3/2/55; Development of the Native Cotton Industry, 9 May 1923 (A3/2/68), MNA. The initial contract was for five years and was to be renewed every three years afterwards.
Marketing Board (1951) and the Tobacco Marketing Board (1951), but they were later amalgamated into one, beginning with the Agricultural Produce and Marketing Board (1955), the forerunner to, first, the Farmers Marketing Board (FMB) in 1962, and then, the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC) in 1970.52

The second purpose of the legislative frenzy was to give the government and its agencies the power to extract and keep the difference between the money that the country’s crops fetched on the world market and the amount that officials decided to give the growers. The surpluses generated in this way kept rising as the ordinances became more successful in driving out competitors from the market. In 1966, the FMB’s net profit (after deducting its expenses in buying crops from peasants and selling them abroad) represented only 0.09 per cent of the total international value of the country’s peasant-grown cotton, tobacco, and a few other crops. That figure rose to about 12.77 per cent in 1971, when ADMARC announced its first earnings as a corporation. However, by 1977, the figure had more than trebled to 38.76 per cent. As Table 6.2 shows, ADMARC’s profits kept growing during the same period that producer prices were stagnant (Table 6.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year ending</th>
<th>31 December 1966</th>
<th>31 March 1971</th>
<th>31 March 1977</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Net sales value of crops purchased</td>
<td>15,556</td>
<td>20,833</td>
<td>58,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net profit/loss on crop trading</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2660</td>
<td>22,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net profit on crop trading as a percentage</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>12.77</td>
<td>38.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Adapted from Ng’ong’ola, “Statutory Law”, ch. 6, Table 13

The third and probably most important objective of the legislation, in terms of the long-term development of peasant cotton agriculture, was to give the state and its boards the freedom to spend the surpluses from peasant produce as they saw fit.

Before the 1950s, government officials loudly proclaimed their intention to use surpluses from the peasant sector to subsidize producer prices in the event of a collapse in world prices. It did not take long before events proved the hypocrisy of that claim. When the Great Depression came in

the early 1930s, the government had accumulated some £17,300 as part of its share of the BCGA’s profits, yet not a penny of this went to assist suffering cotton producers.53 Later, the deficit-ridden Malawi government seized every opportunity to declare its intention to subsidize peasant production, but it never saw an occasion to implement that policy. Nevertheless, the same officials always did what they said they would when it came to the second use of peasant surpluses.54

Starting in the 1950s, marketing boards were tasked to join the government in “developing” the country. This role required the boards to invest their profits from peasant agriculture in private ventures and statutory corporations. The old rhetoric of price stabilization began to disappear after the formation of the FMB and especially ADMARC, which like any other corporation, measured its success by the size of its profits. In 1977, ADMARC invested in about forty private and state enterprises in the country, enterprises that were beholden to urban welfare, and thus diverting surpluses from rural labour to subsidize urban development and lifestyles.55

One agricultural sector that benefited from ADMARC’s role as an investor was the estate-based tobacco industry of political elites, including Life-President Banda himself. Peasant producers, who created the surpluses with their sweat, received no such assistance. There was no ADMARC or government to help cotton growers who needed money to pay labourers or purchase spray technology; most growers met those expenses through loans that carried high interest rates. It seems that the more resources growers put into the cotton industry, the less they got out of it.

Implications of the gap between producer prices and inputs

The widening gap between inputs and producer prices severely limited the possibilities for capitalist agriculture in Malawi, as peasants not only underutilized spray technology and wage labour, but also spread their energies across different economic enterprises. Villagers did not specialize in cotton farming, but combined the cash crop with food production, fishing, cattle keeping, wage employment, and other activities. They diversified their efforts partly because they could not live on cotton alone (just as they could not survive on any of the alternatives alone) and partly because they

53 Mandala, Work and Control.
55 Ibid., pp. 368-463.
needed these other sectors to finance their cotton operations. Cotton had become a parasite.

Persistently low producer prices led both rich and poor farmers to use the expensive and unsubsidized spray technology sparingly; the poor because they could not afford the amounts they needed, and the rich because – to ward off the possibility of loss in the event of really low prices – they sold some of their pesticides to the poor. In the end, no one applied the technology as recommended. Many did not spray at all in the event of a drought.56 Rain shortage not only augured the possibility of a bad harvest, but also raised the cost of labour by increasing the distances people had to walk to obtain water for spraying.57 Thus, a large amount of the pesticides used in 1995 to 1996 came from 1994 to 1995, a season of drought.

It was not, however, only in times of drought that growers tried to minimize the cost of spraying. Farmers tried to cut expenses on a regular basis. For instance, they often increased the water-to-pesticide ratio, mixing one packet of Carbaryl with six gallons of water, instead of the recommended three. At other times they split one packet into two, mixing each half with three gallons of water.58 Other villagers sprayed two rows of cotton with the dosage recommended for one.59 However, the most common method of reducing the cost of spray technology was also a labour-saving strategy: Villagers simply reduced the frequency of spraying. In one sample, they applied insecticides on average about five times instead of the recommended frequency of twelve to fourteen applications per season.60 Financial considerations also led cotton growers to underutilize wage labour.

When the need arose to engage extra-household labour, as during the weeding and harvesting seasons, most growers could only afford “casual” (waganyo) rather than the more expensive “regular” (wanchito) workers. The casual labourer would supplement the farm’s stable workforce, consisting of the wife, husband, children, and dependent relatives. The children and

57 Ibid.; Chikwawa District Monthly Reports (Agriculture), January 1980 (11.4.9F/40352), MNA.
59 SVADP, Monthly Advice (February 1975), MNA.
60 SVADP, Monthly Advice (February 1974), p. 360. I arrived at this figure on the basis of the information that each season, rich and poor peasants sprayed, on average, 6.2 and 4.1 times, respectively. See also SVADP, Monthly Advice (April 1974), p. 417, MNA.
dependent relatives supported the peasant farm’s regular operations, as did thangata tenants on the “successful” European tea and tobacco plantations in the Tchiri Highlands. Despite their differing cultural backgrounds, both European and African farmers courted dependent workers, as an effect rather than a cause of their inability to employ wanchito workers as the backbone of their operations or to acquire ploughs and other agricultural technologies. For the same reason, cotton farmers continued to straddle different economic endeavours.

Because they could not live on their cotton proceeds alone, all cotton growers also regularly raised food for their own consumption, although the poor devoted more of their energies to food than the rich did.61 Some extended their non-cotton operations beyond food, to include fishing, cattle keeping, and wage employment. They divided their efforts among these operations because neither cotton, food production, nor any of their competitors could fully support a household’s needs in the partially commercialized village economy. From this perspective, cotton growing and its alternatives were functionally equivalent; none could be relied upon as the only source of income. Both non-cotton growers and cotton farmers straddled over several economic activities to support their main productive enterprise. But cotton was a parasite for economic as well as political reasons. Villagers pumped resources into cotton agriculture from other sectors of the economy because there was always a market for the cash crop. In this respect, Malawi’s cotton economy was no different from that of Georgia during the 1940s when, according to the former US president, Jimmy Carter, “there was always a cash market at the prevailing price”.62 No other product of the peasant sector in Malawi enjoyed such a privilege, and as we have seen earlier in this chapter, cotton enjoyed such favour because of its origins in the violence of the tax legislation. Extra-economic pressures were key to the development of the peasant cotton regime as a parasite.

Peasant cotton agriculture passed through two phases on its journey as a parasite. The first stretched from the first to the fifth decade of the twentieth century, when – under the popular methods of intercropping and intra-seasonal rotation – the unpaid labour of oppressed members of the household closed the gap between what merchants paid and the actual costs of producing the crop. Cotton acted mostly as an “invisible” parasite

61 NADD, “Garden Survey”, ch. 5. The survey shows that cotton occupied 12 per cent of the smallest gardens but up to 40 per cent of the largest fields. See also NADD, “Garden Survey”, ch. 4, MNA.
during this period, compared with what came in the second phase, running from the late 1940s to the present.

As a result of its rising labour demands and the high cost of the spray technology, cotton agriculture began to absorb resources from entire sectors of the economy during Africa’s second colonial occupation in the late 1940s. For example, many farmers used food to pay waganyo casual labourers, but even more significant was the support cotton received from wage employment outside peasant agriculture.

Having started as an alternative in the country’s tax regime, wage employment beyond the valley started to prop up cotton agriculture in the 1950s under the colonial government’s Master Farmers Scheme (MFS). A countrywide drive to create yeoman farmers, this programme recruited its candidates from those who were already rich. Cotton farming could not produce its own candidates for the scheme. The project instead relied on villagers who had made money in fishing, cattle keeping, food production, and especially as migrant workers. As one researcher aptly concluded, the MFS did not create rich peasants; it only assisted those who were already rich.63

The SVADP followed the same path as the MFS. Well over 68 per cent of the project’s Type II or “progressive” growers during the 1970s had worked and saved money outside the country as migrant workers.64 Further, a common strand in the testimonies collected during the late 1990s is the story of a husband or son who, as a wage earner, sent money home for cotton cultivation. With this money, the wife or parent could procure sprayers, insecticides, and labour.65 Thus, in sharp contrast to the prosperous cotton centres of the first four decades of the twentieth century, the new epicentre of cotton agriculture in the country, the Ngabu Chiefdom of Chikwawa District, sent large numbers of its youths into wage employment within and beyond the district.66 Cotton “needed” the extra income to survive as an enterprise, in much the same way as the South African mines “needed” the “reserves” to reproduce their workforce. Students of export production can learn something from the vigorous debates about circulatory labour migration in southern Africa.67

64 CCDP, “Farm Survey, 1970-71”, MNA.
65 Wikika Mbayenderana, Mbayenderana Village, TA Kasisi, Chikwawa, 16 May 1996 (SM96/2); May 1996 (SM96/4); Magret Jongesi, Mphamba Village, TA Ngabu, Chikwawa, 20 May 1996 (SM96/6).
66 SVADP, “Cotton Survey, 1974/75,” p. 17 (Table 2L), MNA.
67 See, for example, Wolpe, “Capitalism”; First, Black Gold.
Conclusion

As an agent of Britain’s ruling classes, the colonial state in Malawi was quite effective in shaping the labour relations of cotton agriculture. It not only elevated smallholder cotton farming to a pillar of the colonial relationship, but also successfully directed surpluses from the peasant sector to support other classes within and beyond the country. These transfers of wealth and the power regime that backed them, rather than the natural environment or culture, were the decisive factors in the failure of cotton agriculture to transform peasants into capitalist farmers.

Africans’ incomes from cotton subsidized the needs of several non-peasant groups, starting with the state itself in its role as a tax collector. Other claimants on the same incomes included merchants, railway companies, African tobacco farmers, and metropolitan textile industrialists. As a result, there was always a wide gap between producer prices and what the country’s cotton fetched on the world market. Cotton agriculture turned out to be unprofitable among European farmers, because they were also affected by some of the transfers, particularly the high freight rates charged by the country’s railways. However, settlers and peasants reacted differently to their common plight.

Africans continued to grow cotton, while European farmers abandoned the enterprise, bringing an end to the government’s first and preferred experiment in capitalist cotton farming. The fact that in their explanations of the fiasco, government officials in Malawi placed the blame on the environment only proves Andrew Sayer’s point that: “For too long the ruling classes have attributed to ‘Nature’ [...] the iniquities and sufferings for which the organization of society is responsible.”68 Nature did not conspire against European farmers; nor did it favour African growers. European and African cotton growers operated under the same hot and humid environment of southern Malawi; they reacted differently because they belonged to different classes in the colonial pyramid of power. Settlers were “free” agents whereas the colonized Africans were not.

African producers could not quit the unprofitable enterprise, because as British subjects they had to earn cash, even if only in order to pay their taxes. Extra-economic pressures were in full force in the peasants’ engagement with the world economy. For the inhabitants of the Lower Tchiri Valley at the beginning of colonial rule, participation in the world economy meant either wage employment on European enterprises, or smallholder cotton

68 Sayer, "Epistemology", p. 31.
agriculture. However, after their successful resistance to wage labour, villagers were left with no alternative other than to grow cotton. They could not withhold labour from wage employment and smallholder cotton agriculture, and remain British subjects. Under British power, successful resistance to wage labour implied submission to cotton merchants and the textile industry.

To raise cotton under the above conditions was to venture beyond the margins of economic rationality. This was precisely what the engineers of the colonial agenda had sought from the beginning: to compel Africans to produce for the world market, even when it did not make economic sense. The cotton industry thus developed as a parasite, feeding on the uncompensated labour of social juniors and other dependents, within and beyond agriculture. Britain's cotton project in Malawi provides a revealing case study in the reorganization of rural labour relations under colonialism.

As elsewhere, cotton agriculture in Malawi was labour-intensive. The pressure on household labour was particularly acute, because given their low incomes from cotton, most cultivators also grew their own food. The labour demands of the food economy collided further with those of cotton, because the cash crop did not come with new technologies: Africans entered and came out of the colonial period with nothing but the hoe. There were severe labour bottlenecks during the growing season, and heads of households and other farming enterprises looked for help through dependent relations.

It is therefore true, as some have observed, that the rise of export agriculture in Africa witnessed a “proliferation of patronage relations”. In Malawi, both cotton-growing peasants and European tea planters deployed different types of semi-servile labour relations, ranging from social juniors to *thangata* tenants. However, as I have insisted in this chapter, the courtship with dependent labour was an effect, not a cause, of the farmers' inability to engage regular wage labourers or make use of advanced technologies.

In the end, what killed the dream of both colonial and post-colonial governments in Malawi to turn cotton growers into “yeoman” farmers was not some ill-defined African “conservatism”, the “hostile” environment, or “unchangeable” cultural traits. The forces that guaranteed the triumph of the peasant option and the country's grinding poverty were much closer to home: the labour relations that evolved as part of British colonialism.
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