

## THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF LATE-COLONIAL MALAWI

doi:10.1017/S0021853710000149

*Political Culture and Nationalism in Malawi: Building Kwacha.* By JOEY POWER.  
Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 332. £50/\$85,  
hardback (ISBN 978-1-58046-310-2).

KEY WORDS: Malawi, nationalism, politics/political, political culture.

Over the past couple of decades, the insights of social history have rejuvenated the study of African nationalism, veering it away from the institutional perspectives that dominated the field at its outset. It is in this framework of continuing scholarly interest for the mainsprings of African nationalism that we must place this long-overdue reappraisal of the Malawian nationalist movement. Power's central ambition is to explore the changing relationships between elite politicians and their constituents and the strategies deployed by the former to recast nationalism into a cause worth fighting for in the eyes of the latter. At the heart of the book, then, lie the 'connections between the parochial and the national' (p. 5), and the author is to be commended for the skill with which she weaves together the two levels of examination. Thus, for all her meticulous attention to grass-roots political mobilization, Power never loses sight of the biographies and motives of central leaders and the broader forces that shaped their political entrepreneurship. The result is a convincing analysis that significantly improves on existing understandings of the political history of late-colonial Malawi.

After describing the beginnings of the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) as a toothless, elitist institution, the book charts the transformation of the party into a genuine mass movement in the course of the 1950s. The ill-fated agitation against the inception of the Central African Federation in the early part of the decade witnessed the first significant – if short-lived – convergence of interests between the Congress's leadership and its rank-and-file members. But it was only in the aftermath of the campaign's defeat that the party finally proved able to ride the wave of popular discontent effectively, forge enduring links between it and the drive for self-rule, and bring about that 'kind of grassroots populism that became the hallmark of nationalism in Malawi' (p. 94). This unprecedented engagement with the grass roots was the work of a new generation of national and middle-ranking leaders, who systematically exploited local concerns both in the urban settlement of Blantyre-Limbe and, especially, in a countryside where the effects of the post-war 'second colonial occupation' were compounding a number of more deep-rooted and intractable grievances. While Power's conclusions will be fairly familiar to regional specialists, her analysis is strengthened by a more innovative emphasis on the role of youth and women as agents of political mobilization.

Of course, this is not a tale with a happy ending, for the organizational efficiency and radical populism so painstakingly cultivated by the leaders of the NAC from the mid-1950s (that is, *before* Hastings Banda's return to Malawi) were paradoxically to culminate in the emergence of one of Africa's most notoriously authoritarian and reactionary regimes after independence. The stories of the rise of Banda and the concomitant degeneration of Malawian nationalism are told in the book's final chapters. Appointed to the leadership of the NAC by virtue of his perceived international clout and *super partes* position, Banda rapidly emancipated himself from the tutelage of the party's 'Young Turks' and worked towards turning the Malawi Congress Party – the reincarnation of the NAC after the 1959 State of Emergency – into a vehicle for his boundless ambition and the propagation of an increasingly intolerant personality cult. The Colonial Office's choice of Banda

as its preferred interlocutor from 1960 helps explain how this remarkable feat was achieved. No less important, however, was the widespread use of extreme forms of political violence and intimidation against real or imaginary dissenters.

The book's exceptional empirical bases deserve special praise. About a third of the volume consists of wonderfully crafted footnotes, displaying a long familiarity with Malawian activists (almost 100 of whom have been interviewed by Power since the late 1980s) and with British and Malawian archives (where the author has dug up an impressive collection of intelligence records, but somehow missed Banda's thick 'student file', which has been available to the public at the National Archives UK for more than ten years). Yet there is a difference between empirical strength and an obsession with detail that occasionally threatens to suffocate the flow of the narrative. Power is clearly too enamoured of her hard-won material to discard any parts of it. I have much sympathy for her predicament, but a stronger editorial hand might have been needed to prune some unnecessarily overburdened and/or redundant sections of the volume.

My main criticism, however, has to do with the book's chronological frame of reference. The decision not to deal at any length with the Banda years (the book ends with the Cabinet Crisis of 1964) effectively precludes Power from substantiating the suggestion of significant continuities in political behaviour implicit in the resort to the ambiguous notion of 'political culture'. My complaint, in a nutshell, is that, having learnt much about the politicization of ordinary Malawian men and women in the 1950s, we learn far too little of their post-colonial fate and their reactions to the foundering of such hopes for a better tomorrow as their passionate adhesion to nationalism had undoubtedly brought about. The book's short incipit on Malawi's imperfect democratization in the 1990s can scarcely be expected to plug the gap. These concerns aside, *Political Culture* attests to the vitality and continuing importance of political history and will certainly become a standard work of reference on Malawian nationalism.

University of Kent

GIACOMO MACOLA

## INSURGENT PEASANTS, FRUSTRATED FORESTERS, AND THE 'BIODIVERSITY TURN' IN TANZANIA

doi:10.1017/S0021853710000150

*Wielding the Ax: State Forestry and Social Control in Tanzania, 1820–2000*. By THADDEUS SUNSERI. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2009. Pp. xxvi + 293. £45.50/\$55, hardback (ISBN 978-0-8214-1864-2); £22.50/\$26.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-1865-9).

KEY WORDS: Tanzania, environment, historical ecology, peasants.

Tanzania enjoys a reputation as a place deeply concerned with preserving its beautiful landscapes and wildlife for global humanity to enjoy in perpetuity. This compact and masterful study traces the fraught environmental history that preceded this current era of 'eco-governmentality' in Tanzania. *Wielding the Ax* argues convincingly that British and German colonial powers, as well as post-independence Tanzania, used similar forestry policies to foster simultaneous economic development *and* social control of Tanzania's rural populations. Forest policies served social-control mechanisms by tying rural Tanzanian populations to developmentalist notions of scientific forest management.