

Agrarian Populism in Colonial and Postcolonial Malawi

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Abstract: This article analyses continuity and change of the agrarian doctrine in colonial and postcolonial Malawi. It engages in a classic debate about images and policies concerning African farming. The article argues that the agrarian doctrine must be related to the broader notion of agrarian populism, more specifically to Chayanov's notion of the logic of the peasant family farm. Employing this broader approach allows a striking continuity of the agrarian doctrine to be revealed. Calls for changes of local institutions did not signify attempts to promote rural transformation, but contained strategies to increase the economic independence of the precapitalist family farm.

Résumé: Cet article analyse les phénomènes de continuité et de changement dans la doctrine agraire au Malawi colonial et postcolonial. Cet article engage également un débat classique sur les images et réglementations liées à l'agriculture en Afrique, et soutient la thèse que la doctrine agraire doit être reliée à la notion plus large de populisme agraire, plus spécifiquement à la logique de Chayanov concernant la ferme familiale paysanne. L'emploi de cette approche plus générale permet de découvrir d'une continuité remarquable dans la doctrine agraire. Les appels aux changements des institutions locales n'indiquaient pas des tentatives de promotion d'une transformation rurale, mais elles contenaient des stratégies pour augmenter l'indépendance économique de la ferme familiale pré-capitaliste.

The continuity and change of colonial agrarian policies in British Africa have been debated for decades. Several historians identify a break in the 1940s as the colonial state began to increasingly intervene and regulate the economy in order to facilitate agricultural growth. In nonsettler econo-

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mies, the changes were embedded in an agrarian doctrine of enhancing the growth of African peasant production. Social conservative ideas of preserving the past were replaced with a more liberal ideology of promoting change. Investments in development schemes increased considerably, and discussions on the relative efficiency of local rural institutions were intensified. Atmore and Oliver argue that the new sources “revolutionised the activities of colonial governments during the post-war period” (1999:197). Peasant farmers were praised for their potential efficiency, and many of them initiated programs aimed at enhancing both technological and institutional change on the African countryside.¹ The district officer was replaced by agricultural officers “as the embodiment of colonial authoritarianism” (Cooper 1981:127), and the colonial policies moved from extractive measures to attempts to modernize the African countryside.

At the same time, historians have found it difficult to conceptualize the postwar doctrine, although both Cowen and Shenton (1996) and Keleman (2007) link it to the rise of Fabian socialism in Britain. The paradox, it seems, is that while the colonial authorities acknowledged the efficiency of peasant farming, their perception of “African social realities” (Berry 1993:47) was not fundamentally changed. In that sense, one can detect both continuity and change in the colonial agrarian doctrine which, as further argued by Berry, “promoted contradictory images of Africans as social beings” (2002:647).

This article uses Malawi as a case to suggest that the local authorities’ policies and images were not at all contradictory and that the interaction between continuity and change makes sense if it is related to the broader notion of agrarian populism. The period under investigation stretched from the early colonial period to the first decade of independence. The end of colonialism is not identified as a historical break, simply because that is not supported by the long-term “rhythms of change” in terms of agricultural growth (Cooper 2002:91ff). The Malawi case reveals an agrarian doctrine that was not static, but was reviewed and altered to meet perceived changes on the ground. In general terms, in periods of perceived growth of African agriculture, existing local institutions understood as different forms of communalism were praised, while periods of perceived stagnation were followed by discussions and/or policies to transform land tenure rights. Colonial policies were in that sense reactive, and we can only understand them by distinguishing between intentional development and immanent processes of change. Changes in perceptions and policies regarding land tenure must, however, be understood as embedded in a more fundamental understanding of African farmers as, by nature, precapitalist family farmers. Calls for institutional change were measures to strengthen the precapitalist family farms rather than transform rural relations of production. Therefore, I argue, shifts in policies regarding land tenure did not challenge this basic premise of agrarian populism. So, in a broader sense of the term, there was a remarkable degree of continuity in the agrarian doctrine.

It has proved difficult, if not impossible, to find a common definition of agrarian populism (see, e.g., Canavon 1982). For some writers it refers to ideas of undifferentiated rural communities based on religious or ethnic rather than class identities, while others argue that agrarian populism is an ideology biased toward a class of middle peasantry, in development studies also referred to as the middle-peasant “doctrine” or “hypothesis” (see Brass 2000:11–39; Idahosa 2004:37ff; Watts 1983:80). Leaving these differences behind, one could argue, as Idahosa (2004:14) does, that the development of capitalism and the breakup of precapitalistic communities constitute the basic problematic of agrarian populism. From this perspective, the crucial aspect becomes identifying and understanding the logic of the socioeconomic organization of peasant farms in general, and its transformation during the evolution of capitalism in particular. I argue that the continuity and change of the colonial and postcolonial agrarian doctrine are best captured by relating them to the ideas of the Russian agro-economist and populist A. V. Chayanov (1986) on the logics of peasant family farms. I do not suggest that the local authorities were directly inspired by Chayanov; that would be an ahistorical claim, as it is most likely that they did not know about his work at all. The inspiration came rather from ideas of trusteeship and dual mandate, which were mixed with American populist ideas of early settler societies in North America.² However, the colonial and postcolonial understanding of African peasant farming becomes logical, although not necessary defensible, in the light of Chayanov’s ideas.

Chayanov, who indirectly contested Lenin’s claim that capitalist production systems were under way in the late-nineteenth century rural Russia, argued that peasant agriculture possessed a critical advantage over large-scale capital-intensive farms, namely its flexible organization of production and thus its capacity to survive economic crisis. According to Chayanov, the reproduction of the peasant economy is determined endogenously, governed by the demographic cycle of the family. Peasants are family farmers not driven by profit but by a labor–consumer balance. As no wages are paid, the prices peasants are willing to pay for land is affected by the size of the family rather than the relative prices of the factors of production. Hence, there exist differentiation processes across families, but these are cyclically rather than linearly determined by the size of the family (i.e., demographic differentiation). The family farm is not dissolved by the expansion of capitalism, but it continues to be reproduced as capitalism brings about a transformation of the commodity chains through vertical concentration of capital. Peasant farmers are partially integrated into the capitalist economy and hence able to survive its temporary downturns. This is the essence of Chayanov’s agrarian populism, and there are striking similarities between these ideas and the agrarian doctrine in colonial and postcolonial Malawi.

Chayanov’s ideas have been criticized both on empirical and theoretical grounds. The most common critique is that they present a static view of peasants, that they neglect social relations of production and differentia-

tion, and that the efficiency of family farming to a large extent is dependent on self-exploitation. Africanists and historians have revealed that relations of production in twentieth-century rural Africa were far more complex than Chayanov's notion of the family farm is able to grasp. Most historians agree that the developments in twentieth-century rural Africa cannot be characterized in terms of separation of producers from means of production. Family farms have remained the dominant form of production. Yet throughout the century, family labor has been supplemented with labor allocated both through social networks and markets, and that differentiation among rural producers has increased over time.³ However, the processes have not been linear, as the use of wage labor has fluctuated over time. Neither is it easy to apply any theoretical concept of class, at least not in the Marxist sense of the concept. It is difficult to employ such methods because of the relative absence of individual-based private property and the role of family heads in controlling family labor, two factors that prevented the creation of "neat packages of classes" (Peters 2004:285). Nevertheless, social relations of production were far more complex than the colonial and postcolonial authorities accounted for. It is easy to blame this on lack of sources that prevented detailed surveys in rural Africa. However, as Mandala has shown (1990:202–17), findings from local surveys had little impact on colonial policy. Findings that contradicted the authorities' ideas of pre-capitalist family farms were ignored or even adjusted to fit with the doctrine of agrarian populism.

African Cash Cropping and the Rise of Agrarian Populism

Nyasaland was established as a British protectorate in 1891. During the first two decades, most resources went to the development of law and order, public works, and communication, and to establishing a basic infrastructure. It was not until 1908 that a Department of Agriculture was established at the request of the white planter community, and during the department's first decade of operation most of its resources went to supervision of the estates. A common feature for British Africa in general was the lack of financial resources. Private investors were more or less absent, and Britain was not prepared to make any major investments in its colonies and protectorates (see Cain & Hopkins 2002:566). The colonial officers in Nyasaland were preoccupied with strategies to increase revenues and keep public expenditures low, which demanded a great deal of pragmatism in regard to colonial policies. An ideal source of income could have been the import tariffs, but with few Europeans living in the protectorate, the imports remained modest and hence also the revenues (Gardner 2009:5). A more reliable source came from hut taxes that were introduced in the 1890s but collected throughout the whole protectorate beginning in 1904 (Baker 1975:41–43).

Africans needed to generate incomes in order to pay taxes. For the people in the southern parts of the district, two sources were initially avail-

able: working on the European-controlled estates or growing cotton. The colonial authorities' pragmatism is revealed in their attempts to reform the tax system in order to facilitate both African cash cropping and day laboring. In 1901 a differential tax rate was introduced. Africans who worked on estates paid three shillings per month, while the others had to pay six shilling per month. This arrangement satisfied the estate owners and the workers, but it also satisfied the African farmers who had just begun to cultivate cotton, since they were granted a tax rebate in order to stimulate a further expansion of African cash crop production (Baker 1975:49).

The African cash crop producers soon acquired the reputation of being excellent taxpayers (Mandala 2005:168). Their importance as taxpayers increased further as the number of Africans engaged in cotton continued to increase. Between 1906 and 1923 peasant production of cotton accounted for 50 percent or more of Nyasaland's exports of cotton (see Mandala 1982). Parallel to these developments, an increasing number of African farmers in Lilongwe and Dowa district began to grow fire-cured tobacco in the mid-1920s (PRO CO 525/111). By 1930 the share of total output of tobacco that stemmed from African farms was more than 50 percent (Palmer 1985:236). Hence, by the end of the 1920s the cash-cropping peasant sector had become the basis of the colonial economy.

In the north, the situation was different. Lack of infrastructure effectively prevented the growth of estate and/or African cash crop production. The low level of commercial production gave the region the epithet "the Dead North" by colonial officials (MNA S12/1/15). A significant feature of "the Dead North" was the large number of people who temporarily or permanently left the district in search for employment abroad. Migrant work had been common in the district since the early colonial period, but in the 1920s the number of people who left the district increased significantly (MNA DCM 2.3.1). The exact number is difficult to estimate because of the large share of people who left unofficially (i.e., who had not been issued a passport). In 1935 the governor reported that only 2 percent of the migrants held passports, which is of course a guesstimate and most likely an exaggeration, although there are good reasons to believe that a majority of those who left did so without carrying a passport (MNA S1/54.H/33). Local surveys conducted in connection with tax-collection drives revealed that in some villages in the north more than 30 percent of the male population was absent. In a few cases the figure exceeded 50 percent (PRO CO 525/161). Of special concern for the colonial authority were the people who left permanently and never returned, locally known as the *Machona* (lost ones) (PRO CO 525/161). As will be revealed below, the colonial authority feared the negative effect that migration could have on African farming.

Meanwhile, the colonial authorities welcomed the expansion of African cash crop production in southern and later central Malawi, but they initially lacked explicit policies regarding African cash crop production. The common view among colonial officials was that continued expansion of

cash crop production demanded institutional change toward individualization of land rights (Pachai 1973:693). Consequently, the authorities deliberately tried to provide African farmers with the option of buying Crown Land in the first two decades of colonial rule, and a number of prominent African cash croppers managed to register their landholdings as lease- or freeholds (Ng'ong'ola 1990:45; Pachai 1973:693–94). This never became an official policy for two reasons. First, despite the expansion of African cash crop production, the colonial authorities were not certain about the capacity of Africans as cash croppers. In 1920 the land officers wrote to the director of agriculture that Africans would never be able to increase production “to . . . the extent that the white man raises it.” The director of agriculture disagreed, arguing that “the white man only stops here for a few years to make money and then clears out . . .,” but the governor supported the land officers’ view and there was hence no need to take action toward individualization of African land rights (Pachai 1973:693).

The Colonial Office in London and chiefs in Nyasaland also happened to share interests in pushing for communal land rights. In the mid-1920s the imperial government, through the East African Commission, began to pressure the colonial authorities in central and eastern Africa to move forward and implement an administrative system of indirect rule. The Colonial Office’s agenda was different from that of the colonial authorities. The officials in London were to a larger extent influenced by the debate on the natural status of African communality and eager to establish a sustainable governing system in Africa that prevented social disorder (Cowen & Shenton 1996:295). Africans, they believed, ought to be given the right to live in accordance with their own tradition in which they all were cultivators living in tribal communities. Or, to quote the Colonial Office in Britain, indirect rule was an attempt to find an administrative system for people “not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world” (PRO CO 525/136/16). Economic growth was going to be secured by expansion of estates’ cash crop production, while primitive accumulation among African farmers would be obstructed by implementation of laws that prevented Africans from buying or selling land. African cash cropping was welcomed as long as it did not lead to consolidation of land holdings and the rise of a class of landless Africans—a mix of the liberal doctrine of trusteeship and socially conservative ideas of preserving the imagined past.

Locally, chiefs pressured the colonial authorities in Nyasaland to establish an administrative system that both secured the legal status of the Africans and protected the interests of the chiefs. The colonial authorities had begun to move in the direction of indirect rule by 1912 with the implementation of District Administration (Native) Ordinance. The implications were that the colonial authorities began appointing local chiefs and village headmen who were given limited judicial powers, but the chiefs’ control over land was not strengthened (PRO CO 625/1). The appointed chiefs, especially in the southern region, were not satisfied and demanded greater

powers. They feared that land where they were settled would be expropriated and distributed to European immigrants. The colonial authorities, on the other hand, feared political disturbances initiated by missionary-educated Africans who wanted to break free from the rural hierarchies. Since they depended on chiefs' willingness to recruit Africans for public works projects, the authorities were prepared to meet most of the claims of the chiefs.⁴

The colonial authorities were thus pressured by the local chiefs as well as the Colonial Office, and they were prepared to meet the demands as long as they were not convinced about the superiority of African peasant production. In a speech in 1933 the governor argued that "the introduction of any system tending toward the development of native institutions should coincide with a final solution of the land question" (PRO CO 626/12). The same year, the Native Authority Bill was passed by the Legislative Council in Nyasaland organizing the rural communities into Native Authorities ruled by local chiefs and his administration (PRO CO 525/148/5345). The bill also formalized rural land tenure systems. Land could not be owned privately or traded. Instead, the village headmen became responsible for the distribution of village land, while the principal headman had the overall powers of distribution in the communities (MNA NNM Report on Native Rights, 1936). Thus, parallel with the continued expansion of African cash crop production, a land tenure system based on nonmarket principles was institutionalized. Embedded in the larger question of establishing a coherent administrative system was the reformulation of the land question. African rights to land as a group, rather than an individual farmer's capacity to accumulate productive resources, had become the governor's main concern. African farmers should be encouraged to "develop along their own lines and in accordance with their own principles" (PRO CO 525/141/34072).

The introduction of indirect rule and the formalization of Native Trust Land did not imply, however, that the colonial authorities had fully abandoned previously held views regarding land tenure and cash cropping. Many of the European estates faced severe difficulties in surviving the Great Depression in the early 1930s. Palmer (1985) has shown how the estate sector, with the exception of the tea estates, nearly collapsed by the end of the Depression as white-owned estates were abandoned by farmers who had gone bankrupt. The colonial authorities continued to argue in favor of individual property rights on African farms. The secretary of Native Affairs, who commonly defended the will of the chiefs, even warned about "anthropologists and others who may wish to perpetuate native customs merely for their own sake" (PRO CO 525/145). Precapitalist organization of production was not consistent with sustainable growth of African cash crop production in the longer run, but introduction of private property rights to stimulate primitive accumulation was at the time not politically feasible. What Phillips (1989) writes about the colonial authorities in West Africa is equally true for Nyas-

aland: "They could not impose conditions which would create free labour without weakening the chiefs on whom they relied in the interim of forced labour and political order" (quoted in Keleman 2007:87).

While the aim of indirect rule was to strengthen communalism, there were indications that the policy partly facilitated a landlord-tenant relationship that the chiefs publically were against. In the 1920 and 1930s, the chiefs' ability to allocate labor for public works was both recognized (and occasionally exaggerated) and supported by the colonial officers. However, these powers were never discussed in relation to rural labor relations, even if the authorities were aware of the fact (as they seem to have been) that the most prominent African cash crop producers depended on allocation of additional labor. Chiefs in the Shire Highlands in southern Malawi, for example, distributed land to the Lomwe people in exchange for cotton produce in the early twentieth century when the supply of land was still relatively large (Chirwa 1994:536). This practice continued in the 1930s. The district commissioner of Thyolo concluded in 1935 that there were Lomwe people along the border with Portuguese East Africa who cultivated cotton for the chiefs. The chiefs gave them a piece of land to cultivate for their own consumption and in exchange the Lomwe had to provide labor services. After a couple of years they were given usufruct rights to the land and no longer had to supply labor to the chiefs and headmen (MNA S1/17.C/38).

This was not a process of primitive accumulation, but a tenancy arrangement that depended on the headmen's ability to redistribute land within their area of jurisdiction. Indirect rule further strengthened chiefs' control over land and hence enabled chiefs to further exploit the landlord-tenancy arrangements. In that sense, indirect rule facilitated ongoing processes of differentiation based on precapitalist principles. Although the district officer in Thyolo was obviously informed about these developments, they were never discussed or analyzed by the colonial government.

The increased burdens faced by the British due to World War II accelerated the progress of financial reforms in regard to the colonies that had been on the agenda since late-1930s. A crucial change was that the Colonial Office abandoned the idea that the colonies would be able to develop without major assistance from the Colonial Office. With the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts of 1940 and 1945, new resources were made available for the colonial authorities, enabling them to develop and implement major rural development schemes in line with the Colonial Office's new agrarian doctrine directed more explicitly toward small-scale production (Cowen & Shenton 1996:296). Investments in agricultural projects and development schemes increased substantially, and new policies were designed to promote institutional and partly technological change of African farming systems (Cowen & Shenton 1996:296; Beusekom & Hodgson 2000:29).⁵ Increased agricultural production became the overall goal and, as Cooper says, "the agricultural extension agent replaced the district officer as the embodiment of colonial authoritarianism" (1981:127).

In Nyasaland the new resources made available by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1945 enabled the colonial authorities to establish a whole set of projects related to African agriculture.⁶ In the meantime, African cash crop production continued to increase (although lack of sources prevents any detailed estimation).⁷ The colonial authorities, who in the 1930s had abandoned the idea of a vibrant estate sector, now, with greater intensity, began to debate how to promote African production. The new possibilities revitalized the discussion about local rural institutions and their role in the sustained expansion of African cash cropping. In 1949 the newly appointed director of agriculture, R. W. Kettlewell, argued that the colonial authority needed to “make a complete change in its agricultural policies within the very near future unless it is to meet disaster. The population increases and there is yet no sign that the African cultivator is willing or able to change his ways. . . . A method of mass attack must be found and put into operation quickly” (PRO CO 626/25). He was responding to the fact that Nyasaland, in the same year, had experienced the worst famine since the establishment of the Protectorate. The famine evoked a debate concerning agricultural policies in Malawi. The European planter community was especially active in the debate. They put forward the arguments that the famine was caused by overpopulation and/or increased interests among African farmers in growing tobacco at the expense of cultivation of food crops due to state-regulated pricing policy that favored tobacco. The colonial authorities were influenced by both arguments, but leaned toward explaining the famine as an effect of overpopulation (Vaughan 1987:77–79). The pricing policy constituted a vital strategy for the colonial state’s economic survival and was thus not likely to be changed. High population densities in the southern region and their effect on soil erosion and the productive capacity of the soils, on the other hand, had been discussed intensively within the colonial administration since the early 1930s. As a matter of fact, the roots of the colonial intervention were found in environmental concerns (see Green 2010:255–59). From that perspective, the famine spurred ongoing discussions rather than altering the perspectives held by the colonial officials.

If the colonial authorities had been reluctant for political reasons to promote private property rights in the interwar period, they were now showing greater enthusiasm for the idea of institutional transformation. In 1956 Sir Geoffrey Colby (governor in Nyasaland between 1948 and 1956), in an address to the Royal African and Royal Empire Societies, reminded the audience that the colonial authorities in the late 1940s “were also fully alive to the need of getting away from the idea of commonly held land which perhaps is one of the curses of African agriculture” (quoted in Colby 1956:277).

Changing views were also noticed in the Colonial Office. The Secretary of State for Colonies urged in a dispatch sent to all governors in British Africa in 1944 that they should set up land commissions to investigate African land rights and tenure. Even in 1939, in fact, the Secretary of Colonies,

Malcolm MacDonald, had argued that registration and individualization of African land must be seriously taken into consideration. Hence, less than a decade after the implementation of indirect rule, the Colonial Office also began to question its very foundation by urging the governors of British Africa to investigate the possibilities of registration and titling of peasant landed property (PRO CO 525/183). Following the recommendation, the governor of Nyasaland decided to set up a commission of inquiry, which came to the conclusion that the long-term aim of land policies should be a transformation of Native Trust Land to private property, while at the same time discouraging the chiefs from exercising their powers in preventing the rise of individual enterprises. The long-term goal was to promote individualization of land tenure (PRO CO 525/207/44332). However, the plans were never realized, as circumstances were about to change in Britain.

The Consolidation of Agrarian Populism

With the victory of the Labour party in Britain in 1945, ideas of Fabian socialism were brought to the Colonial Office.⁸ The Fabians rejected ideas of promoting development through the growth of foreign-controlled large-scale farms in Africa. Instead, the African peasant farmer was regarded as adjustable and able to increase production for the market, but only if he was supported by the state (Cowen & Shenton 1998:52). Increased state intervention thus went hand in hand with a peasant-based development doctrine. It was not only the efficiency of the African peasantry that was praised, but also the organization of production as perceived by the Colonial Office and the local colonial authorities. After World War II the newly appointed Secretary of State for Colonies, Creech Jones, stated that "it is our deep rooted policy to preserve the social organisations we have inherited and modify them only gradually" (quoted in Keleman 2007:85). Communal models of development based on co-operatives were looked upon as a socially and politically feasible alternative to privatization. Agricultural development became associated with ideas of tribalism and communalism. Within these communities selected farmers could be supported in order to create "self-motivated, economic agents" (Keleman 2007:89).

The colonial authorities in Nyasaland, now strengthened financially, still lacked support for their ideas of promoting individualization of African lands, not only from the Colonial Office but also the chiefs. For example, at the Southern Province African Provincial Council meeting in 1954, Subchief Kamakanga from Mzimba District argued that a transformation toward private property would lead to the development of a landlord-tenant relationship between Africans. He continued by arguing that such a development would threaten the social harmony in the rural areas and therefore also put the colonial project at risk (MNA PCS 1/19/11). Provincial and district officers, who worked more closely with the chiefs, also shared the chiefs' concerns and tended to be skeptical about the idea of

promoting individualization of land rights. They met with the chiefs on a regular basis and had a better understanding of the magnitude of local opposition that would occur if tenure rights were to be transformed.⁹

The opposition locally and abroad prevented the colonial government from going further than the discussion stage, and it all ended with vague statements about the need to promote secure property rights without disorganizing the communities. In 1951 the District Commissioner of Thyolo stated, for example, that “there must be a security in land rights but total individualization is not desirable” (MNA Miscellanies Group Report on Rural Development, 1950). In 1953 even Director of Agriculture Kettlewell officially altered his position in regard to land tenure, stating in a circular that further support of African cash crop production was a viable strategy to strengthen the rural communities and prevent local social instability. Increased cash cropping was no longer seen as conflicting with the rural social order, but was a precondition for sustaining the precapitalist rural communities, at least from a medium-term perspective. The content of the agrarian populist doctrine had altered. African farmers were regarded as reliable and efficient producers and communal property rights were seen as adaptable to expansion of production.

Part of the changes in opinion could be explained by the authorities' increased concern about the developments in northern Malawi. The number of people who left the northern provinces officially (i.e., with a passport) to work in the mines in South Africa or on the estates in Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) continued to increase steadily. In Mzimba district, for example, the number of people who left increased more than 50 percent from 1945 to 1966 (PRO CO 525/161). Kettlewell, among others, expressed his concern about the future of African communities in the north. He concluded that there was an “overall culture among natives to leave the farms in order to earn money” (PRO CO 626/32). The discussions dealt primarily with supplies and not relations of labor. The main concern, often expressed by the agricultural officers working in the north, was that migration led to shortages of labor supplies, which reduced agriculture production and even caused local hunger crises. The dominant view was that the migrants mainly consisted of males who regularly left their villages for a couple of years to work in the mines in Northern Rhodesia and/or South Africa. Their wives were left behind with responsibility of bringing up the children and maintaining the farm (PRO CO 525/161). The assumed effect was less land cleared for planting and hence decreased production, although it is unclear if this decrease pertained to absolute or per capita numbers (PRO CO 525/161).

This rather static view on migration patterns has been criticized by several scholars.¹⁰ Research from northern Malawi also reveals a more complex structure of labor relations, including reciprocal arrangements as well as use of hired labor (see Green 2008). Yet the concern about migration and its effect on rural production discloses how colonial officials understood the structure and logic of African farms. Farming was strictly a house-

hold enterprise, consisting of a rather rigid division of labor in which men were not only responsible for farming, but also possessed the knowledge about accurate farming practices. The women were reduced to laborers who worked under close supervision of their men. Or, as Cooper says about Africa in general: "In the 1950s vision of economic development, African men had become at least potentially productive, and women remained primitive cultivators and the bearers of backward culture" (1989:755–56).

Two major programs were initiated in the 1950s, the Village Improvement Scheme and the Master Farmers' Scheme. The former was an outcome of the Land Commission Report's call for the resettling of Africans from congested areas in the Southern Region by buying estate land (PRO CO 525/207/44332). The advantage of the newly acquired land was the opportunity it presented for planning along the framework of agricultural extension work—that is, the development of Village Land Improvement Schemes. In 1944 the director of agriculture affirmed that "the redistribution of population will prove to be one of the most urgent and important problems in connection with the protectorate land usage schemes" (cited in Beinart 1984:117). The plans included consolidation of landholdings and concentration of village sites, rather than working with individual farms. The resettlements therefore became part of a more comprehensive plan of strengthening the communal institutions.

The Master Farmers' Scheme was proposed in 1946 (Kalinga 1993:369). The initial idea was to identify so-called progressive farmers: farmers who followed the colonial authorities' stipulated soil conservation measures (making of ridges and bunds) and production recommendations (early preparation and rotation). These targeted farmers, according to the report, should then be supported with the aim of creating a new class of peasant farmers that would form the *avant-garde* for social and institutional change (PRO CO 626/27). The identified farmers would have their land registered and would hence partly break free from the native authority. However, the program was postponed due to lack of resources, and its preparations started seriously only after the famine of 1949. Land registration was abandoned, and the aim was no longer to transform landed property rights, but to reform them in order to create a class of yeoman farmers, that is, politically conservative farmers who would adopt progressive farming methods.¹¹ In terms of agricultural methods, it was a progressive vision: farmers would not break free from the communal ties, but rather work within the perceived social and institutional structures of the rural communities. The selected farmers were supposed to act as catalysts for the development of the community as a whole by inspiring the fellow farmers to adapt to the stipulated agricultural methods.

The selection of individual farmers indicated that the colonial officials recognized the existence of social differentiation in the rural communities. However, their understanding of differentiation had little to do with social relations of production, let alone relations of labor. Instead, land,

knowledge, and culture were pointed out as key differences. Farmers who were “progressive”—who accepted and were able to absorb new knowledge regarding farming methods—were to be identified and supported. Differences in landholding sizes were also recognized, but they were not identified as constraints in the longer run. Once the average farmer, defined as uneducated and unwilling to change, would witness the profits made by the more progressive farmers, they would slowly rearrange their mindset and absorb the new farming techniques.

The notion of African peasants as a fairly homogenous group of family farmers was contested by data collected by the colonial authorities. In connection with the review of the scheme, a number of surveys of the performance of individual master farmers were carried out in 1955–56 (see Kalinga 1993:337). None of the surveys included figures for yields or sales of crops for individual master farmers; they merely revealed the income and expenditures of individual farmers for 1954–55, and therefore they should be looked at with caution. Taking this into consideration, findings from the Central and Northern Region showed that farmers spent a large amount of money on wage labor and that the cost of labor posed a serious barrier to a sustained accumulation process. It is not the aim of this article to analyze the causes of the high costs of labor (see Green 2011). What is striking is that the reviews did not facilitate discussions about labor relations on peasant farms. As a matter of fact, labor was not even pointed out as a problem when the scheme was revised. Instead, based on the reviews, it was concluded that the farmers did not reinvest the profits in farming and the appointed farmers therefore failed to spur capital accumulation (MNA PCN 1/2/34). African farmers, independently of their wealth, were perceived as precapitalist family farmers who accessed labor through family ties and social networks. The doctrine implied that colonial production was to be increased “not through the extension of capitalist relations within the colonies themselves” (Vaughan 1987:87), but by strengthening the productive capacity of “promising” precapitalist family farms.

Agrarian Populism Redefined

In the early 1960s it had become obvious that many of the late-colonial rural schemes had failed to reach its goals (see Green 2011). The programs were abandoned, not only because of economic factors, but also for political reasons. Besides the opposition to the Central Africa Federation, resistance to colonial intervention in rural areas in general and the use of force in particular had been a key issue in the nationalist agitation. The late-colonial period is often said to be collectively remembered as “the darkest era in the history of agricultural extension service in Malawi” (Kabuye & Mhango 2006:6). Meanwhile, the newly elected president, Kamuzu Banda, and his Malawi Congress Party had promised a future of wealth and prosperity and urged for continued intervention in the agricultural sector.

Initially, the independent government did not break with the late-colonial doctrine. The focus remained on the precapitalist African peasant sector, although no coherent or long-term plan existed (see Mkandawire 1992:178). However, for the first time since the 1920s there were signs that the African peasant sector had fallen behind the estate sector in growth of output. Estate production grew at an average annual rate of 6.6 percent from 1964 to 1969, while the growth of output on peasant farms was merely 2.1 percent annually (Githinji & Gondwe 1998:4). This created concern within the Agricultural Department. President Banda was skeptical about the capacity of small-scale precapitalist African farming and was more than willing to use these figures as motives for changing policies. Again, it was the question of land tenure that became the central concern. Right after independence Banda made it clear that “under the existing law the availability of land in the country is being used uneconomically and wastefully” (MNA LP/17/1). He even went further and stated before the Malawi Parliament (1966–67) that the main problem with customary land was that that no one was held responsible for developing land since “everybody’s baby is nobody’s baby” (cited in Ng’ong’ola 1982:115). This was a clear break with the late-colonial doctrine.

Two kinds of changes were noticed, and both were related to issues of land tenure. First, the estate sector was for the first time since the interwar period regarded as a more efficient and reliable organization of production in terms of generating economic growth and revenues. This led to a reversal of policies whereby the government encouraged high officials to purchase or lease estates (Pryor & Chipeta 1990:53). Between 1973 and 1983 privately owned or leased land increased by 30 percent (Mhone 1992:13–14). Categorization of the estate sector in Malawi is based on type of land ownership and not size (i.e., estates are by definition private land or leaseholds). As a matter of fact, many of the new estates were medium-sized farms rather than large-scale estates (Lele & Meyers 1989:26). The new policy of encouraging the growth of the estate sector thus marked something more fundamental than simply large- versus small-scale farming. It was part of a broader attempt to create a new class of rural entrepreneurs and weaken the power of the chiefs. It marked a break with the late-colonial communalism.

In addition, two new statutes were enacted by Parliament in 1965, the Registered Land Act and the Local Land Board Act. The former allowed African farmers, for the first time, to register their land. The latter stated that a Land Board, on which chiefs, agricultural officers, and local politicians would be represented, would replace the chief as executive power when it came to land transfers on Native Trust Land. The acts did not mark the introduction of a free land market, but they further reduced the powers of the chiefs in favor of local political officials and agricultural officers (Ng’ong’ola 1982:116). Banda knew that chiefs were opposed to these changes. It was therefore decided that the two acts would initially be

implemented in a limited geographical area, namely in the western part of Lilongwe district in central Malawi. The land tenure reforms, just like land consolidation in the 1950s, hence became part of a larger development scheme—the Lilongwe Land Development Programme.

According to Ng'ong'ola (1982:121), the reason that LLDP was chosen was that the area was almost exclusively occupied by the Chewa. It was believed that their practice of matrilineal and uxori-local marriage customs made transition toward private property rights necessary. Under customary law, usufruct rights to land were exercised and controlled by extended families defined as a minimal lineage of consanguine sisters. The family was commonly represented by a senior male member, such as a brother or an uncle. Distribution of land within a village was controlled by the village headman. The idea behind the acts was that land was going to be demarcated and registered as separate units belonging to a minimal lineage of consanguine sisters, and the demarcation team relied heavily on the village headmen to identify these (Ng'ong'ola 1982:124). They thus did not represent an attempt to create individual security. Rather, their immediate aim was to promote consolidation and secure perceived family property rights, at the same time strengthening the local government's power and control over interfamily distribution of land (MNA LP/17/1).

One could argue that the independent government managed to take steps that had been on the agenda for fifty years. This was possible for two reasons. First, development economists and the major international donors supported integrated rural development, which was believed to be the most efficient measure to increase agricultural production and improve health and social welfare (Staatz & Eicher 1998:16). In Africa, these projects became associated with the idea of "building basic institutions" to promote individualization of land rights (Mellor 1998:59). Second, Banda and the Malawi Congress Party managed to minimize opposition, not primarily by means of its repressive measures, but through Banda's strategy of combining conservative rhetoric with policies of institutional change. In official speeches he often praised the historical role of the chiefs and advocated social-conservative ideas such as respect for elders and chiefs (see Kalinga 1998:541ff). Measures were also taken to increase the chiefs' influence over local politics by strengthening the powers of the traditional (native) courts (Forster 1994:490). Banda's ambiguous views of change and conservation most likely facilitated the introduction of land tenure reforms.

Despite all changes, independence did not mark a break with agrarian populism, as some scholars implicitly argue. Mhone (1992:13), for example, claims that "what made the crucial difference in the postindependence period was the decision by the government to exploit land and labor, to enhance indigenous capitalist development thereby also increasing the retention of value-added within the economy." This view neglects the remarkable degree of continuity in the agrarian doctrine. The design of the Lilongwe Land Development Programme, for example, depended

on the very same assumption as the schemes in the late-colonial period, namely that the targeted farmers not only were, but also would remain, family farmers. The program management was aware of rural differentiation in the area but assumed that it corresponded with size of land holdings and access to capital. Labor relations were never explicitly discussed, though access to labor was assumed to be satisfactory and secured through family ties and social networks.

Even by the 1950s there had been signs of a growing group of wealthy capitalist-oriented farmers in the area who grew tobacco by employing wage laborers; these were to a great extent the rural entrepreneurs who were praised by Banda and his government (see McCracken 1982). The programs' own evaluations also indicated that rural differentiation was more complex than the program management assumed. Jonathan Kydd has compared the Farm Management Surveys carried out by the Evaluation Unit in 1969–70 with a survey for 1978–79 in order to detect processes of differentiation.¹² He identified five groups of farmers who differed in terms of land size, crops grown, and types of labor used. The most important dividing line between the groups was the combination of two elements: the amount of resources allocated to tobacco production and the extent to which wage laborers were used (for a more detailed overview, see Green 2010). The data reveal that changes on the ground were complex and give little support to the notion of African farmers as a homogenous group of precapitalist producers who depended solely on family ties and social networks to access labor.

The irony is that while the agricultural officers clearly knew about farmers' use of and dependency on different forms of labor, including wage labor, these relations were ignored and made invisible as all relations of labor was defined as household relations. Unlike earlier programs, the Lilongwe Land Development Programme also included specific socio-economic surveys, conducted annually with different themes like agricultural knowledge and structure of peasant agriculture. The surveys indicated clearly that richer farmers used different forms of hired labor. Yet in the presentation of the findings, all forms of labor were defined as family labor. Thus a family consisted not only of its members, but also of all those who worked on the farm on a temporary or permanent basis (Reader 1971). The precapitalist family farm paradigm was so strong that it did not only affect specific policies, but it also lasted despite increased awareness among agricultural officers and policymakers about the complexities of rural relations of production.

Continuity and Change

The agrarian doctrine in colonial and postcolonial Malawi aimed, explicitly or implicitly, at supporting an expansion of peasant crop production, but the content of the doctrine changed over time due to changing local circumstances. In general terms, policies were reactive and tended to follow

trends in crop production on African peasant farms. In times of sustained growth, African institutions, understood by the colonial authorities as different forms of communalism, were praised for their efficiency. In times of stagnation, discussions focused on the future of peasant farming and the need of transforming rural institutions. Looking at the colonial and early postcolonial period, one can thus easily detect change in the agrarian doctrine, with a clear bias toward land tenure.

At the same time, there was a striking continuity in the agrarian doctrine. Calls for land tenure changes should not be understood as an attempt to promote rural capitalism, but rather as a strategy to increase the economic independence of the family farmers, by partly distancing them from chiefly powers. Independently of the officials' views on land tenure, they all shared a basic assumption that African farms were precapitalist enterprises depending on family labor for their reproduction. This assumption was never questioned, and the growth of capitalist-oriented relations of production was neither investigated nor discussed. At this fundamental level, the case of Malawi is a story of continued agrarian populism. The colonial and postcolonial authorities recognized and supported the growth of production on African farms, but they never considered the effects the growth had, or could have, on production relations on African small-scale farms in the broader sense of the term.

The colonial and postcolonial authorities were of course not influenced by Chayanov's model of peasant farming in any direct sense. However, their perceptions of African peasant farms and the content of the agrarian doctrines make sense in the light of Chayanov's ideas. The colonial and postcolonial officials' limited concern about labor relations in peasant production becomes rational if we link it to Chayanov's notion of farmers driven by a consumer–producer balance and depending mainly on family labor for their reproduction. The organization of production will from this perspective—per definition—not be threatened or transformed by an expansion of cash crop production. It is solely a matter of reallocating family labor. The authorities' bias toward land tenure also makes sense from this perspective. Individualization of land rights was not a step toward a private property regime, but an attempt to strengthen the household, or rather the identified head of the household, as well as the local government's control and power over inter-family land distribution. It was an attempt not only to strengthen the presence of the government in the local communities, but also to facilitate the ability of the individual farmer to adjust the size of landholdings according to the demographic cycle of the family. Shifts in policy regarding land tenure did not, therefore, mark a break with agrarian populism.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Kalinga (1993); Morapedi (2006); Rizzo (2000).
2. See Allen (1992:14); Cowen and Shenton 1996:294–96); Kalinga 1993:369).
3. See Austin (2005); Freund (1998); Iliffe (1983); Oya 2010).
4. See Chanock (1975); White (1984); Green (2011).
5. See Cowen and Shenton (1996:296); Beusekom and Hodgson (2000:29).
6. By 1953 there were 59 European Officers and 715 African instructors (PRO CO 1015/15; PRO CO 525/218/44334).
7. A major problem is that official statistics in the 1950s did not differ between smallholder and estate production. However, the information available indicates that African cash cropping continued to be of major importance. For example, the Department of Agriculture claimed in 1950 that the record year for production of tobacco could be explained almost entirely by the increased production of dark-fire tobacco by African farmers. Statistics for the 1960s supports the assumed linear trend of increased African cash crop production.
8. For a more detailed overview, see Keleman (2007).
9. At a Provincial Conference in 1947, the provincial commissioners agreed that individualization of land rights, which had been identified as a long-term goal by the land commission, would not be doable in Malawi (MNA NSE 1/1/2).
10. E.g., Ferguson (1990); Moore and Vaughan (1993:140–49).
11. See Bernstein (2002:439); Kalinga (1993:369).
12. The scope and quality of the data collected for the Farm Management Surveys were better than those collected for the other evaluations conducted as part of the LLDP. Agricultural and nonagricultural income was collected on a daily basis for twelve months. In previous evaluations, agricultural income was tentatively estimated by multiplying estimates of crop production by what were believed to be the relevant prices. See Kydd (1984:22–23).