

THE MARTIAL SPIRIT:  
YAO SOLDIERS IN BRITISH SERVICE IN  
NYASALAND (MALAWI), 1895–1939

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**ABSTRACT:** During the colonial period, the Yao formed the main source of recruits for the King's African Rifles Nyasaland (Malawi) battalions. Originally, the main reason for the large number of Yao volunteers was probably the simple fact that the recruitment office was near Yao areas. However, due to prevailing racial ideals the British colonial military interpreted this as a sign of a 'martial spirit'. This led to active encouragement to enlist the Yao, which in turn made military service ever more attractive among this group. They became the 'martial race' of Nyasaland, a concept which continued to affect British recruitment policies until the Second World War.

**KEY WORDS:** Central Africa, Malawi, colonial, military, ethnicity.

THIS article deals with the ethnically based recruitment policy of the British colonial military. As a case study I have chosen Yao soldiers serving in Nyasaland (present-day Malawi) battalions of the King's African Rifles (KAR). Although the period includes a global war, the First World War, the main focus of the article is on the colonial army as a place for peace-time employment. As with all historical analysis, its scope is further curtailed by the sources available. The African veterans of the early KAR have already died without leaving behind much testimony in a written form. What we have are reports, letters and statistics compiled by British officers and civilian authorities. This places severe limits on what can be said about the African soldiers of the KAR. It is not their view that comes across from the sources, but that of their European superiors. Instead of dealing directly with the perceived identity of the Yao soldiers themselves, I shall have to content myself with the image their commanding officers had of them.<sup>1</sup>

The following article concentrates mainly on a single aspect of the colonial officers' attitudes towards their African soldiers, that of ethnic images and 'martial races'. The British had a strong tendency to categorize people in racial terms. They believed that ethnic background went a long way in defining the character of an individual.<sup>2</sup> In Nyasaland it was the Yao who came

<sup>1</sup> For a definition of identity see e.g. M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, 11: *The Power of Identity* (Oxford and Malden MA, 1997), 6–12. I have not collected oral material for this article as it would have been very hard to find people who served in the small peace-time Nyasaland KAR battalions before the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, "'Damnosa hereditas': ethnic ranking and the martial races imperative in Africa", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 3 (1980), 394–410.

to be regarded as a 'martial race', well suited to military service. Why was this and how were the Yao recruits themselves affected by this definition?

The social history of the KAR has already been thoroughly investigated by Timothy Parsons in his recent book.<sup>3</sup> However, Parsons concentrates heavily on the regiment's experiences during the Second World War and this emphasis in many ways overshadows his dealing with the pre-war KAR. Moreover, he mostly focuses on battalions recruited from Kenya and Uganda and leaves Nyasaland battalions in the background. This article seeks partially to rectify these limitations by concentrating on the Nyasaland soldiers in the peace-time KAR before 1939.

#### THE YAO OF MALAWI BEFORE COLONIAL CONQUEST

The Yao are relative newcomers to present-day Malawi. Their original home was to the east of Lake Malawi (Nyasa). From there they began gradually to move west sometime in the late eighteenth century. By the middle of the next century they had colonized much of the southern lakeside. Not much is known about this exodus, but it appears to have started as a peaceful immigration of small groups escaping both external and internal pressures. Despite such an inauspicious beginning, the newcomers were able to benefit from pre-existing trade links to the coast in order increasingly to dominate the indigenous peoples of the area, mainly the Man'ganja (or Nyanja). After some internal power struggles, five major Yao chiefdoms emerged south of the lake, each of them centred on a large fortified settlement.<sup>4</sup>

The wealth and prestige of the Yao chiefs came from their position as middlemen in the expanding commerce in slaves and ivory carried out by Muslim Swahili traders along the East African coast. Arming their retainers with muskets, they raided for slaves over a large area and sold the captives to the Swahili, or to Portuguese slavers in Mozambique. With the wealth thus acquired, the Yao were able to obtain more firearms, which allowed them to solidify their internal power and further intensify their slave-raiding operations. Competing violently among themselves for supremacy and access to slaving grounds, their only other rivals were the Ngoni, who were consolidating their own powerful chiefdoms in the west by conducting ruthless wars of enslavement and extermination.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> T. H. Parsons, *The African Rank-and-File: Social Implications of Colonial Military Service in the King's African Rifles, 1902-1964* (Portsmouth NH, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Alpers, 'The Yao in Malawi: the importance of local research', in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi* (London, 1972), 168-74; H. W. Langworthy, 'Central Malawi in the 19th century', in R. J. MacDonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi* (Nairobi, 1975), 13-15; J. C. Mitchell, *The Yao Village: A Study in the Social Structure of a Nyasaland Tribe* (Manchester, 1956), 12-17 and 24-6; and M. A. Vaughan, 'Social and economic change in southern Malawi: a study of rural communities in the Shire highlands and upper Shire valley from the mid-nineteenth century to 1915' (Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1981), 61-4 and 72-5.

<sup>5</sup> For the Yao slave trade see Alpers, 'Yao in Malawi', 169-74; V. L. Jhala, 'The Yao in the Shire highlands, 1861-1915: political dominance and reaction to colonial rule', *Malawi Journal of Social Science*, 9 (1982), 3-9; E. Mandala, *Work and Control in a Peasant Economy: A History of the Lower Tchiri Valley in Malawi, 1859-1960* (Madison, 1990), 66-84; Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 17-19; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 75-81.

All this, however, mainly affected the upper hierarchy of Yao society. Most of the people lived outside the fortified towns in small villages. Village life was regulated by a complex system of matrilineal relations that maintained the community without much need for outside interference. Despite their increasing power, the Yao chiefs were still more like patrons of largely autonomous villages than effective rulers.<sup>6</sup>

As usual, the ethnic identity of the Yao during this period is rather difficult to pinpoint. Some of the subdued Man'ganja sought to align themselves with their conquerors, but many retained their old customs and beliefs. Nor is it even clear whether the original immigrants were themselves Yao in any strictly ethnic sense. While still living in the east the Yao had developed strong ties with their Man'ganja and Lomwe neighbours. It is thus quite possible that a number of the immigrants actually belonged to these latter groups.<sup>7</sup>

After their exodus, the Yao adopted many cultural elements from local Man'ganja, including to some degree even their language. At the same time they were also influenced from another direction. During the nineteenth century the Yao chiefs were converted to Islam and began to model themselves after the Swahili. As yet, the new religion had little impact among commoners, but other factors were already eroding the traditional social system of the Yao. Long-distance trade required more of the men's time, and agricultural work was increasingly left to the women. As compared to the rewards from commerce and, later, slave-raiding, the mundane tilling of land began to be viewed with disdain by men and this negatively affected the traditional status of women.<sup>8</sup>

Famine appears to have been one of the causes which forced the Yao to leave their original homeland. If so, it might have already been aggravated by a lack of male agricultural labour. Relocation to new land did little to improve this, and the arrival of the Yao also hampered the agriculture of local peoples. Extensive slave-raiding and the resultant withdrawal of the remaining population to more defensible highland areas led to further agricultural decline. By the late nineteenth century the Yao chiefdoms and their surrounding areas were no longer self-sufficient in provisions.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS OF THE BRITISH CONQUEST

The Yao chiefs were natural competitors with each other and this was to contribute to their downfall. The first British missionary station at the south end of Lake Malawi was established in 1875. Missions became a source of

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 31–7, 46–7 and 71–112.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 65–8; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 60–72 and 146–51. For the fluidity of ethnic identity in East Africa see e.g. J. Koponen, *People and Production in Late Precolonial Tanzania: History and Structures* (Studia Historica 28, Gummerus Kirjapaino OY, Jyväskylä 1988), 180–91.

<sup>8</sup> E. A. Alpers, 'East Central Africa', in N. Levtzion and R. L. Pouwels (eds.), *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens OH, 2000), 307–8; E. Mandala, 'Capitalism, kinship, and gender in the lower Tchiri (Shire) valley of Malawi, 1860–1960: an alternative theoretical framework', *African Economic History*, 13 (1984), 137–69; Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 131–82; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 68–71, 75–81 and 143–5.

<sup>9</sup> D. Hirschmann and M. Vaughan, *Women Farmers of Malawi: Food Production in the Zomba District* (Berkeley, 1984), 9 and 10–11.

lucrative new resources and as long as they did not form a military threat, the chiefs were usually prepared to overlook their hostility towards slavery. The apparent harmlessness of the missionaries was underlined by the fact that their teachings had little appeal among the Yao commoners, although they did gain some converts among the victims of the slave trade, especially the lake-side Tonga.<sup>10</sup>

Dismissing the missions as harmless was a crucial mistake on the part of the Yao chiefs. Following the missionaries' lead, the British government gradually became interested in the area. The actual conquest of future Malawi proved to be an intermittent affair that took a decade to accomplish. Devoid of much obvious strategic or economic importance for the British, the area was invaded in a haphazard way and at minimum cost. After the Yao chiefs realized their error in having tolerated the missionaries, they put up a strong resistance that lasted for over five years. Internally divided and in any case hopelessly outmatched by the potential military might of the British Empire, they were more or less subdued by 1895.<sup>11</sup>

The advent of British rule was a disaster for the Yao chiefdoms. The slave trade was banned and the conquerors took the trade in ivory, already in decline due to over-exploitation, under their own control. Tribute from subdued peoples also ceased. Cessation of internal fighting within the new Central Africa Protectorate meant that fortified towns, the bases for Yao chiefs' domination, became obsolete. More people dispersed to villages and the power of the chiefs waned. Having been defeated by the British they were viewed, even by themselves, as the slaves of their conquerors.<sup>12</sup>

The British soon realized that complete erosion of traditional power structures would not be in their interests either. The downfall of the chiefs was followed by loss of prestige among their underlings, the village headmen. Fearing the consequences, the British began to rebuild the prestige of native authorities by linking them to the lower levels of the colonial system. Order was finally restored with the introduction of the District Administration (Natives) Ordinance of 1912, which created a clear chain of authority among the headmen, the chiefs and the colonial administration.<sup>13</sup>

There were also other unexpected consequences of colonial rule. Overwhelming British military superiority was able to enforce internal peace and this enabled Muslim scholars from the coast to open religious schools in the protectorate. The result was a greatly increased rate of conversion to the new faith among Yao commoners. However, whereas becoming a Muslim had previously benefited Yao chiefs in their dealings with Swahili traders, this was no longer the case. Christianity, the faith of the new rulers, gained ground among other local ethnic groups and the Yao were soon suffering from cultural isolation. Christian missionaries were also the sole source of Western education available and the Yao were thus excluded from being able

<sup>10</sup> Alpers, 'Yao in Malawi', 174–5.

<sup>11</sup> See H. Moyse-Bartlett, *The King's African Rifles: A Study in the Military History of East and Central Africa, 1890–1945* (Aldershot, 1956), 17–22; E. Stokes, 'Malawi: political systems and the introduction of colonial rule, 1891–1896', in E. Stokes and R. Brown (eds.), *The Zambesian Past* (Manchester, 1966), 359–68; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 101–9 and 217–30.

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 37–41.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 37–45 and 52–8.

to integrate themselves into the colonial system as clerks, interpreters and so on.<sup>14</sup>

The greatest immediate threat to the Yao came, however, from the continued deterioration of their agriculture. Living in a densely populated area it was hard to make up for lost sources of income by increasing cultivation.<sup>15</sup> The situation was made worse by the actions of the colonial administration. The British intended to create a thriving plantation economy in the protectorate, run by European settlers for whom the best land was reserved. Transport costs to world markets were high for which the settlers needed to compensate by using cheap labour. Accordingly, Africans were required to pay taxes at a rate that required them to find additional income. At the same time, they were effectively discouraged from competing with the settlers in cultivating cash crops.<sup>16</sup>

In order to pay their taxes the impoverished Yao first tried to grow cotton, but this failed due to transport expenses and government hostility.<sup>17</sup> Some Yao farmers found a living by providing food to the plantations and to military and civil authorities, but the demand was limited. Obsessed with ethnic categorization, the British civil authorities soon labelled the Yao as especially suited for 'skilled labour, such as sewing, pruning and brick-laying'.<sup>18</sup> This opened some additional opportunities. For a time many Yao males worked as carriers, but the demand for portage declined when a railway was built over

<sup>14</sup> Alpers, 'Yao in Malawi', 174–5; M. Chanock, 'Agricultural change and continuity in Malawi', in R. Palmer and N. Parsons (eds.), *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, 1977), 401; R. Greenstein, 'The Nyasaland government's policy towards African Muslims, 1900–1925', in R. J. MacDonald (ed.), *From Nyasaland to Malawi: Studies in Colonial History* (Nairobi, 1975), 145–7; I. Linden, *Catholics, Peasants, and Chewa Resistance* (London, 1974), 23–4 and 28–30; S. Marks, 'Southern Africa 1867–1886', in Roland Oliver and G. N. Sanderson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vi: *From 1870 to 1905* (Cambridge, 1985), 417–19; Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 37–41; and J. Van Velsen, 'Some early pressure groups in Malawi', in E. Stokes and R. Brown (eds.), *The Zambesian Past: Studies in Central African History* (Manchester, 1966), 383–5. In 1901 there were some 3,300 African children attending missionary schools in the protectorate. By 1912 this figure had risen to over 80,000. Colonial Office, Public Record Office, Great Britain (CO) 452/5: British Central Africa 1901–2, Return of the population, 138. CO 452/15: Nyasaland: Blue Book, March 1912. U 5. Return of schools.

<sup>15</sup> Population density in the region seems to have been relatively high. Mitchell, *Yao Village*, 12–13.

<sup>16</sup> Hirschmann and Vaughan, *Women Farmers*, 9–10; Jhala, 'Yao in the Shire highlands', 9–14; B. S. Krishnamurthy, 'Economic policy, land and labour in Nyasaland, 1890–1914', in B. Pachai (ed.), *The Early History of Malawi* (London, 1972), 384–99; Mandala, *Work and Control*, 101–32; M. Page, 'Malawians in the Great War and after, 1914–1925' (Ph.D., Michigan State University, 1977), 9–11; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 109–31 and 151–88.

<sup>17</sup> In 1901 there were over 1,000 acres under cultivation in the white plantations while Africans, mainly the Yao, cultivated only a little over 100 acres for export. By 1912 the Yao no longer dominated the remaining African cash crop cultivation. CO 452/5: British Central Africa 1901–2, Return of the Population, 160. CO 452/15: Nyasaland: Blue Book, March 1912. Y5. Native agriculture.

<sup>18</sup> Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 157. For Yao migrant labour see e.g. M. E. Page, *The Chivaya War: Malawians and the First World War* (Boulder CO and Oxford, 2000), 69–70; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 132.

the Tchiri escarpment in 1908. Still others became migratory workers in South African, Rhodesian, or Katangan mines, where hard work brought relatively good wages. However, perhaps due to their cultural isolation, the Yao never adopted mine labour on the same scale as some neighbouring ethnic groups. Finally, there was the prospect of volunteering for service as soldiers in the colonial army.

#### THE YAO BECOME A 'MARTIAL RACE'

Although the British had managed to conquer the land at a relatively low cost in manpower and resources, they knew that in order to maintain their rule they would need a continuous military presence. In 1901, there were an estimated 700,000 Africans in the Central Africa (after 1907 Nyasaland) Protectorate and only around 450 Europeans.<sup>19</sup> Military force was clearly needed to keep the former under the yoke of the latter. However, the British preferred to make their non-European subjects pay for their own subjugation and as the new protectorate did not produce much profit for the Empire, the expense of garrisoning it had to be kept as low as possible. The solution was to use soldiers recruited among the Africans themselves.

The British had much experience in the use of locally recruited soldiers in maintaining their growing empire. The main principles guiding such recruitment had been forged during the conquest of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These principles were based on an assumption that local troops could be regarded as trustworthy if certain precautions were maintained. Native soldiers should never be used against peoples among whom they had been raised. Instead, they should be moved to other locations, preferably somewhere where they would guard their traditional enemies. Also, too much reliance on a single ethnic group should be avoided and a balance kept between soldiers drawn from mutually suspicious or even hostile groups.<sup>20</sup>

Although locally raised soldiers were always regarded as inferior to European troops, there were several arguments in favour of their use. Native units were not thought to require the same levels of outfit, supply and wages as European units and they could thus be maintained at a lower cost. Casualties suffered while maintaining the so-called 'Pax Britannica' would also be more tolerable domestically if the victims were non-Europeans. Finally, it was assumed that native troops were better acclimatized to local environmental conditions, which often proved deadly for unfit Europeans.<sup>21</sup>

Recruitment of Africans for military service began almost as soon as the British arrived on the banks of Lake Malawi. Missionaries used African mercenaries for protection, and later the actual conquest was undertaken by mixed contingents of African and Indian troops. However, these early

<sup>19</sup> CO 452/5: British Central Africa 1901–2, Return of the population, 126.

<sup>20</sup> For a contemporary description of the ethnic principles in the Indian Army see G. H. MacMunn, *The Armies of India* (London, 1911), 129–72.

<sup>21</sup> For a contemporary view of the use of native African soldiers see Nyasaland Secretariat Record, Malawi National Archives (MNA) S/52/6/27: Nyasaland Handbook, 1922–6, part 1. Also Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 1–4.

African recruits were mainly outsiders from Zanzibar and Mozambique. Besides the occasional use of local auxiliaries, the only indigenous troops in British service were some Tonga Christian converts who defended the missions.<sup>22</sup>

All this changed in 1896 with the raising of the Central Africa Regiment (CAR, renamed in 1900 as Central African Rifles). The CAR was to recruit volunteers within the borders of the protectorate to fill six companies of 210 men each. All officers were European, and an Indian company provided a core of reliable veterans. The term of service for native recruits was three years, after which they could seek re-engagement for additional terms. It was originally foreseen that the regiment would be employed solely to preserve British rule within protectorate borders.<sup>23</sup>

Backed by their long experience with native troops, the British felt assured that they could rely on the loyalty of their new African recruits, if they just maintained the usual precautions. First of all, it was vital to segregate the volunteers into separate ethnically based units. This, it was hoped, would help the soldiers to form ties of comradeship and encourage a sense of competition between units. The main benefit, however, was to strengthen the soldiers' ethnic awareness so as to be sure that they would not make common cause against their European masters.<sup>24</sup>

In order to achieve this, the military authorities first had to ascertain recognizable ethnic divisions among the volunteers. The fluid and blurred ethnicity they faced in the protectorate did not fit well with current European ideas of ethnicity and race. However, this was perhaps not such a setback for army recruiters. Their task was to create and bolster ethnic categorization among individual companies, and this did not necessarily require the volunteers to have a prior clear-cut ethnic identity. Individual soldiers who could be made to fit within certain broad distinctions, such as a common language, might perhaps be persuaded to adopt and share a common ethnic identity while serving in the same company.

In order to make any such categorization possible it was, nevertheless, vital to recognize at least some vague 'tribal' distinctions among the protectorate population. This in turn led to a quest for 'tribal' characteristics. Common contemporary European racial assumptions included a belief that human faculties and behaviour were closely related to ethnic background. Some races, for instance, were by their nature presumed to be more bellicose than others. Among the British military such assumptions had led to the concept of 'martial races', which was now about to be introduced to the Central Africa Protectorate.<sup>25</sup>

Three of the original six CAR companies had been reserved for the Tonga, who were trusted to make loyal soldiers due to their long association with the missionaries. Of the others, two were designated as Yao companies, while the remaining one was to be ethnically mixed. The Ngoni were excluded despite their warlike reputation, as their chiefdoms had not yet been effectively

<sup>22</sup> A. J. Hanna, *The Beginnings of Nyasaland and North-Eastern Rhodesia 1859-95* (London, 1956), 188.

<sup>23</sup> Moyses-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 24; M. Page, *KAR, a History of the King's African Rifles* (London, 1998), 3; and Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 54-5.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. *ibid.* 54-6.

subdued. When volunteers began to arrive, the British noted to their surprise that the majority called themselves Yao and that they included only a few Tonga. The latter had no strong martial traditions and the emerging colonial society provided them with other options to avoid harsh and poorly paid plantation work. Besides fishing in Lake Malawi, or growing maize on its shores, the more ambitious Tonga youths could use their access to missionary education and find menial posts in the colonial administration. Despite half-hearted encouragement by the military, the Tonga were never to become a major source of peace-time manpower for either the CAR or its successor KAR.<sup>26</sup>

The most obvious explanation for why the Yao came to fill the ranks of the first volunteers is simply the location of the British recruiting base at Zomba. The bulk of the Yao lived nearby in what were to become the administration districts of Ft. Johnston, Liwonde and Zomba and formed the majority in at least the first two. In 1901 it was estimated that of the 58,000 people living in Ft. Johnston District, some 39,000 were Yao and the rest mainly Ngoni or Man'ganja. No similar estimation for Liwonde exists, but the Yao formed a majority there as well. Zomba was more ethnically mixed as it was the location of the protectorate capital, which drew immigrants from over a wide area. Notwithstanding the settler-dominated Zomba District, the other two Yao districts were almost devoid of European plantations and this also had an effect on recruitment. White settlers tended to prohibit their tenants from seeking work outside their plantations and thus excluded them from being potential volunteers for the army.<sup>27</sup>

Still, geographical factors alone cannot explain Yao prominence among the early volunteers as such factors would in fact have applied also to some other ethnic groups like the Man'ganja. The most plausible additional factor is related to the dominant position of the Yao in precolonial times. They already had young men with experience of professional military life. The demise of the Yao chiefs had cost hundreds of their former musketeers their employment. Having formerly considered themselves as warriors, the ex-musketeers probably disdained the idea of resorting to the cultivation of land, which they regarded as women's work. Short of adopting the brutal life of brigands the only way they could retain their status as fighters was to join the conquerors' army and become their soldiers.

Yao ex-musketeers were in fact likely to have fewer reservations against volunteering for the white man's army than would have been the case with ordinary commoners. They already knew how to handle firearms. They were also more aware of the challenges of the wider world and the rigours of military life. Having experienced constant internecine fighting among the Yao chiefdoms, they were also liable to take a pragmatic view on becoming

<sup>26</sup> J. McCracken, 'British Central Africa', in A. D. Roberts (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vii: *From 1905 to 1940* (Cambridge, 1986), 610–11, 616–17 and 632–3; Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 24; and T. O. Ranger, *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa 1890–1970: The Beni Ngoma* (London, 1975), 299–300.

<sup>27</sup> MNA NSF/1/6/1: Ft. Johnston District Book, vol. 1, MNA NSL/1/13/1: Liwonde District Book, vol. 1, MNA NSZ/1/13/1: Zomba District Book, vol. 1. Also Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 174 and 204–8.



soldiers of their previous enemies, the British, even if this meant fighting against the remaining recalcitrant Yao chiefs.<sup>28</sup>

Realizing that the Tonga were not going to join the CAR in the numbers expected, the British were quick to welcome the Yao instead. Although perhaps less reliable than the Tonga, the Yao had the advantage of having the clear marks of a 'martial race'. Yao chiefdoms had stubbornly resisted the British who were always prone to regard a formidable former enemy as a potential source of recruits. British officers also concluded that Yao volunteers made the best soldiers 'on account of their obedience, self-reliance and good marksmanship', factors which may well have reflected their earlier experience with military life and firearms.<sup>29</sup>

#### THE MAKING OF A SOLDIER

Whatever the ethnic or social background of the first CAR volunteers, they were bound to experience a harsh cultural shock once they entered the colonial army. For the level of discipline required in a modern European army must have appalled even the ex-musketeers. The life of a soldier was strictly organized around daily routines filled with training and menial labour. The recruits were suddenly forced to arrange their whole existence, including sleeping hours, according to a timetable measured by the clock, a conception of which they had no previous experience.

Besides European notions of discipline, soldiers were required to learn absolute subordination. All resistance was met with severe punishment, including the liberal use of flogging. Corporal punishment had already been banned in most European armies, but the colonial military felt that it should be continued among non-European troops. This was due to another widely held racial conviction. It was believed that Africans and other 'inferior' races had to be forced to acknowledge the innate superiority of the white race, and that this required the copious use of punishments.<sup>30</sup>

Belief in white superiority was also reflected in the organization of colonial units. All officers of the CAR/KAR were European, and originally even the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) were either white or Indian. Africans were regarded as unable to exert command authority over their fellow comrades-in-arms. Later, as the number of locally raised veterans grew, African NCOs became the norm in the KAR, but it would still have been

<sup>28</sup> This pragmatism was shared by the Yao chiefs who quickly became middlemen in colonial administration, in many cases at the expense of the politically less astute Man'ganja headmen. Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 113.

<sup>29</sup> Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 24. This did not, however, prevent the military from viewing the Yao with suspicion. Preparations against a potential Yao revolt were still being made at least as late as 1906. CO 534/3: Inspection report, 2 KAR, 1906.

<sup>30</sup> Of the 21 pages of the first KAR Ordinance, 12 deal with discipline. CO 625/1: British Central Africa: Ordinance no. 1 1903, KAR, 7–18. See also Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 107–8. An intelligence officer displayed succinctly the British officers' patronizing attitudes when he described the supposed nature of African recruits. A soldier 'places implicit confidence in his officers and becomes much attached to them. Quick to learn and simple in ideas he is amenable to discipline. He is however, somewhat credulous and liable to pick up the qualities, good or bad, of those he comes in contact with'. CO 534/49: Local Defence Force, 1922.

unthinkable for any non-European NCO to ever be in a position of authority over European troops.<sup>31</sup>

To compensate for harsh conditions, African soldiers received additional privileges to bolster their already relatively good wages. Soldiers were allowed to bring wives and children to live with them within the garrison precinct, and many took the opportunity to establish a family on their soldier's pay. This was an important concession. Having a wife and children was regarded as a great source of social prestige and young men usually needed permission from elders or village headmen to get married. An opportunity to circumvent this restriction by marrying while in the army was thus seen as a major advantage. There were also practical reasons for taking a wife. Soldiers were expected to prepare their own food, and since cooking was generally seen as derogatory work for men, having a wife to do it was desirable. Married soldiers also received private quarters, whereas unmarried men had to share dormitory accommodation.<sup>32</sup>

Becoming a white man's soldier was bound to affect the social status of these young men vis-à-vis their countrymen. In early days, soldiers were often despised as tools of an oppressive administration and even their own relatives might treat them as outcasts. On the other hand, as henchmen of a conquering power, they also demanded fearful respect. Soldiers took part in tax-collecting campaigns, burning the huts of tax defaulters while powerless villagers could only stand and watch. Local headmen were also expected to provision troops traversing their districts and to see their respected leaders providing food for these young men in uniforms must have had a strong impact on commoners.<sup>33</sup>

A soldier's life was also bound to shake profoundly the world-view of young recruits who had in many cases spent their entire lives in the vicinity of their home villages. A striking, if somewhat extreme, example of this is provided by the experiences of the first CAR troops taken outside protectorate borders. After the Ngoni were finally subdued in 1898, it was no longer necessary to maintain large military forces solely for the needs of the Central Africa Protectorate. Conditions of service in the CAR were therefore amended so that during each three-year term the soldiers would serve two years outside protectorate borders. The regiment was enlarged into two battalions, of which one, the Second Battalion, was sent in early 1899 to garrison Mauritius.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> For the ethnic hierarchy in the KAR see e.g. Kirk-Greene, "'Damnosa hereditas'", 394–410; or Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 105–10.

<sup>32</sup> Soldiers' wives were able to make some profit by also preparing and selling food to the unmarried men. CO 820/6/1: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1928. Interestingly, polygamy was not discouraged and soldiers could register more than one woman as their official spouses. CO 534/41: Inspection report 1919–20. See also J. C. Njoloma, 'The King's African Rifles and colonial development in Nyasaland (Malawi), 1890–1914' (MA thesis, University of Malawi, 1988), 154.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. CO 534/56: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1925; and K. M. Phiri, 'Chewa history in Central Malawi and the use of oral tradition, 1600–1920 (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1975), 210–11. See also Njoloma, 'King's African Rifles', 153–4, 160–1 and 188–9.

<sup>34</sup> The following description is based mainly on CO 534/56: Historical records, 2 KAR.

One can only imagine how the next two years affected the African soldiers and their families. Eight companies (half of them Yao) containing 7 white officers, 32 Indian Sikhs, 878 African recruits, 220 wives and 77 children were marched to the coast. A number of recruits deserted en route, but the rest boarded a ship for a testing journey across an ocean they had never seen before. Early on, embarkation in small boats across a reef proved dangerous and cost the lives of several sailors. At their destination the soldiers encountered violent hostility from Mauritian Creoles, who felt offended that African troops were being garrisoned on their island. The newcomers were forced to live in virtual isolation in their barracks, suffering from winter cold against which they had not been adequately equipped. Almost thirty people died.

In February 1900, the Second Battalion left Mauritius for Somaliland, where the British were hard-pressed fighting the followers of the charismatic leader Al-Sayyid Muhammad. After months of futile marching on the trail of an elusive enemy, suffering from harsh, dry climate and unfamiliar food, half a battalion was sent in July to the other side of Africa to wage a war against the Ashanti. This time there was plenty of fighting in strange jungle conditions, where the troops were furthermore stricken with smallpox. Eventually the other half battalion was also sent to West Africa to suppress the rebels of Gambia. By the time the Second Battalion returned home after its two-year term, the soldiers and their families had received an astonishing amount of experience of the wider world. Fifteen soldiers, including several Yao, had even visited Great Britain, where they had received decorations from the king. Besides a few mission-educated men, they were the first Malawians to see Europe.

#### THE KAR

The Central Africa Protectorate was not the only area in Africa where the British raised local units to maintain their Empire. In fact, most of their colonies had native militias or constabularies.<sup>35</sup> In 1901 a number of such units in West Africa were incorporated into a single regiment, the West African Frontier Force.<sup>36</sup> In the following year the same was done in East Africa, and the CAR became a part of the KAR. The KAR consisted of six territorially raised battalions; one each from Uganda and Somaliland, two from British East Africa (Kenya) and two, numbered First and Second, from the Central Africa (Nyasaland) Protectorate.

Like its predecessors, the KAR was to recruit only volunteers. Unlike the French, the British never introduced open conscription among their African subjects, who were considered to be dependants of the crown.<sup>37</sup> As such they could not, at least in theory, be obliged to answer a call to arms, although covert forms of enforced recruitment would eventually be used during the

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. R. Marjomaa, *War on the Savannah: The Military Collapse of the Sokoto Caliphate under the Invasion of the British Empire 1897–1903* (Academia Scientiarum Fennica, Humaniora 295) (Helsinki, 1998), 27.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 36 and 55.

<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 15–16. For the French methods of native conscription in Africa see M. Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth NH and London, 1991), 7–32.

First World War. The original term of service was three years, but it was soon raised to six. After completing his first term a soldier could apply for additional three-year terms up to a maximum of 21 years in service. In Nyasaland half of a battalion's term was spent outside protectorate borders, mostly in Somaliland, where Al-Sayyid Muhammad continued his resistance, or in garrison duty in British East Africa (Kenya) or Rhodesia.<sup>38</sup>

At first, Nyasaland battalions continued to grow until each of them had 700 men in six companies. In 1907 this trend was radically reversed when the entire Second Battalion was disbanded. Three years later, only four companies of the First Battalion remained. Armed resistance against British rule was faltering all over East Africa, save in Somaliland, and the expense of maintaining strong military forces was no longer deemed necessary.<sup>39</sup> When Rhodesia confirmed that it no longer required KAR patrolling, two more companies were disbanded in April 1911, together with the Indian contingent. By now, Africans with long service records were already being promoted as NCOs and more expensive Indian troops were regarded as dispensable. For a few months the First Battalion had only two companies, some two hundred men, but already in July two new companies were raised to garrison Zanzibar.<sup>40</sup>

According to the first reasonably reliable census in 1921 there were then 185,363 Yao living in Nyasaland. That amounted to 15.4 per cent of the total population. In 1906, a year before its disbandment, the Second Battalion had had 175 men listed as Yao in its ranks. This was some 25 per cent of the battalion's total strength of 639. Of the rest, 148 were said to come from 'closely related tribes' like the Man'ganja and only 69 were Tonga. The drastic military reductions that began in 1907 greatly favoured Yao domination in the remaining Nyasaland battalion. In spring 1911 both the surviving companies were Yao companies, as were the two additional ones raised in July. In 1912 it was reported that of the 455 soldiers in the First Battalion, no fewer than 344, some 75 per cent, were Yao with most of the rest Man'ganja. Such a level of tribal domination was in clear violation of the British recruitment principles and when two new companies were raised in 1913 they were earmarked for the Tonga and the Ngoni respectively. However, when these two ethnic groups did not provide sufficient volunteers, the shortage had to be filled with more Yao.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> CO 625/1: British Central Africa: Ordinance no. 1 1903, KAR, War Office, Public Record Office, Great Britain (WO) 106/271: KAR Regulations, 1908. The higher service requirement for gratuities was later lowered to 18 years. CO 625/1: KAR Ordinance, 1911. Soldiers' wives and children were still allowed to accompany them abroad. See e.g. CO 534/3: commissioner of the KAR to the sec. of state for the colonies, 31 Jan. 1906.

<sup>39</sup> During their tour in Somaliland, Nyasaland soldiers were forced to witness the limits of the apparent invincibility of European arms. In 1903 seven officers and 118 African soldiers of the Second Battalion were killed in a disastrous engagement at Gumburu. For the KAR in Somaliland see CO 534/56: Historical records, 2 KAR; Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 160–94; and Page, *KAR*; 10–24.

<sup>40</sup> CO 534/15: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1912–13; and M. Gelfand, *Lakeside Pioneers: Socio-Medical Study of Nyasaland (1875–1920)* (Oxford, 1964), 185.

<sup>41</sup> MNA S/1/1309/30: Census 1931, 15, CO 534/3: Inspection report, 2 KAR, 1906, CO 534/15: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1912, CO 534/16: Quarterly intelligence report, March 1913, CO 534/18: Governor G. Smith to the sec. of state for the colonies, 4 Feb. 1914. In fact, Yao dominance had by now become so marked that the authorities

The British preferred recruits to be in their late teens. Thus, ex-musketeers from precolonial chiefdoms had by now mostly been replaced by a new generation. In Nyasaland a private received 10s. per month, while a sergeant might get as much as £1 per month. This was less than the pay in other KAR battalions, but it was deemed sufficient as local living costs were also lower. It was also fairly good pay at a time when an unskilled plantation worker earned only some 3s. per month plus upkeep.<sup>42</sup>

Besides above-average wages, the main inducement for joining the white man's army appears to have been the increased prestige of soldiering. Wars of conquest were over and bitterness caused by them was probably receding. The colonial army was an instrument of oppression, but it also kept peace and seemed to have its place in the new order of things. British recruitment propaganda emphasized the exalted status of imperial soldiers in their smart uniforms. As the inspector general of the KAR, concerned over a temporary lack of Yao recruits, noted in 1906:

If an unknown Military Officer goes by himself to endeavour to obtain recruits he will get none ... [A] party of picked NCOs and men with a few drummers and buglers under a picked Officer should accompany the Civil Officer to likely recruiting grounds. Everything should be done to make the service appear as attractive as possible.<sup>43</sup>

Feelings of loyalty and devotion towards the British Empire seem nevertheless not to have been high among African soldiers. When strength reductions began in 1907, re-engagement for another term became much harder. To the annoyance of their officers a large number of former KAR soldiers consequently joined the German colonial forces in Tanganyika. It was said that eventually there were so many veterans from Nyasaland at the garrison of Neu Langenburg that the Germans began to use English bugle-calls and words of command. These African soldiers apparently regarded the colonial army merely as a place of employment and saw little reason to feel any sense of duty towards their former paymasters once they had left service.<sup>44</sup>

None of this explains, however, why it was the Yao who continued to dominate the ranks of the Nyasaland KAR battalions. The recruiting office was still at Zomba and thus readily accessible to the Yao. Most of the

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sometimes referred to Nyasaland soldiers simply as 'the Yaos'. See e.g. CO 534/1: Report by J. T. C. Johnson, 1 KAR, Nairobi 15 Jan. 1905, CO 820/30/4: inspector general's notes, Southern Brigade, KAR, 1938, and MNA KAR/3/1/1: Intelligence report on German East Africa, N/A.

<sup>42</sup> CO 534/10: Military estimates 1909–10. Skilled workers earned £3 per month and miners in South Africa might fetch wages as high as 40–60s. per month plus food. CO 452/5: British Central Africa 1901–2, Return of the population, 142; and Phiri, 'Chewa history', 221.

<sup>43</sup> CO 534/3: Inspection report, 2 KAR, 1906. See also Page, *Chivaya War*, 33–5. During early days boots were not distributed to KAR troops as 'the excellent marching power of native African soldiers is undoubtedly due to a large extent to their being independent of footgear'. WO 106/271: KAR Regulations, 1908. Also Page, *Chivaya War*, 96. Moreover, the soldiers' clothing was not always up to the standards of the British Army. CO 820/25/9: Inspection report, Southern Brigade, KAR, 1937.

<sup>44</sup> Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 153 and 265; and Page, *Chivaya War*, 70 and 73–4.

recruiting tours were also targeted at areas nearby, especially when the all-important band was brought along as an additional attraction. Here, it is hardly surprising that the 'non-martial' Man'ganja also began to figure prominently among recruits once their former subservient status no longer hampered them.<sup>45</sup>

There were also other factors favouring the recruitment of the Yao. The only home leave for native troops was a three-month furlough with half pay between terms of service. Recruits who came from far away were thus unable to keep in touch with home. If they served multiple terms and established their own families while in service, they were likely to lose all connections with their native villages and might never go back. This was bound to affect adversely potential recruits who realized that there might be no return if they went to join the army.<sup>46</sup>

Despite their fears of ethnic imbalance, the British themselves actively encouraged the recruitment of the Yao whom they regarded as the best soldiers. In 1906, the inspector general thought that 175 Yao among the Second Battalion's 639 soldiers was such a low figure that it required looking into, pointing out:

There seems to be some difficulty in obtaining Yaos at the present moment, and since a Yao makes an admirable soldier this is to be regretted. I have recommended more systematic methods of recruitment which I trust will have the desired result.<sup>47</sup>

The inspector continued by noting that it was not advisable to make up for the lack of Yao volunteers by recruiting from other ethnic groups. Instead, he suggested that 'an Officer accompanied by a Civil Officer and a small party of soldiers go to the Yao recruiting districts and make some little show to attract men'.<sup>48</sup> In the eyes of the British officers the Yao had clearly become the 'martial race' of Nyasaland.

#### NYASALAND BATTALIONS DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND AFTER

One characteristic that strengthened British belief in the martial nature of the Yao was their Muslim faith. There was a tendency among officers to regard Islam as a religion which taught 'discipline' and 'civilized manners' to pagans and thus produced better soldiers. Muslims were preferred even to Christians, who were often dismissed as 'insolent' and 'undisciplined'. In August 1915, a group of African soldiers asked local Christian missionaries to request on their behalf permission to build a church school close to the Zomba garrison. Not only was the request refused but the soldiers were flogged for having overstepped military hierarchy.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup> MNA S/1/60 A-H/32: Liwonde Annual Report, 1931, MNA S/52/6/27: Nyasaland Handbook, 1922-6, Part III, CO 534/18: Governor G. Smith to the sec. of state for the colonies, 4 Feb. 1914, CO 625/1: British Central Africa: KAR Ordinance no. 1 1903. Also Page, *Chivaya War*, 33-4.

<sup>46</sup> The terms for furlough were later somewhat improved by increasing their length to six months. CO 625/1: KAR Ordinance, 1911.

<sup>47</sup> CO 534/3: Inspection report, 2 KAR, 1906.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Greenstein, 'Nyasaland government's policy', 152-3, 154 and 162.

On the other hand, Islam also raised additional suspicions among the British who were always sensitive towards the potential dangers which Muslim universality posed to their rule. Commenting on the Yao dominance in the First Battalion in 1912, the inspector general noted:

In the event of any unrest or disturbance amongst the Yao ... we should have to deal with it by troops drawn from the same tribes and of similar religious sympathies. This has hitherto been considered unsound both in our own Empire and amongst other Powers with Colonial possessions.<sup>50</sup>

Such worries increased with the introduction of the militant Qadiri brotherhood to Nyasaland just on the eve of the First World War. The declaration of war by the Ottoman sultan in October 1914 also caused much anxiety. In the end, however, no serious disturbances occurred among the Yao during the war and no mutinies were reported in the Nyasaland KAR battalions.<sup>51</sup>

When the war began in August 1914 the British at first thought it unwise to train too many black Africans in the use of firearms. Instead they relied mostly on Indian, white South African and European troops to conquer Tanganyika, which was mainly defended by Africans under German officers. After it had become embarrassingly clear that a determined and skilfully led enemy could not be beaten without overwhelming military superiority, this policy was reversed and a rapid expansion of the KAR began in spring 1916. By the end of the war, Nyasaland alone had supplied 19,000 men for the hugely enlarged regiment and another thousand served in the Rhodesia Native Regiment. Compared to the protectorate's small population, this was the largest proportional number of soldiers recruited anywhere within British East Africa.<sup>52</sup>

This expansion completely disrupted the ethnic organization of the KAR. In order to fill their quotas, recruitment officers had to accept all the physically able volunteers they could get. Wartime depression gripped Nyasaland

<sup>50</sup> CO 534/15: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1912–13. See also Page, *Chiwaya War*, 128–9.

<sup>51</sup> During the conquest of Nyasaland the British had used Sikhs instead of Muslim Indian soldiers in case the latter might sympathize with their co-religionists, the Swahili slave traders and the Yao. CO 534/15: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1912; Alpers, 'Yao in Malawi', 174–5; Greenstein, 'Nyasaland government's policy', 147–9 and 159–62; Hanna, *Beginnings of Nyasaland*, 195; and Linden, *Catholics*, 93–4. For similar attitudes in the West African Frontier Force see e.g. Marjomaa, *War on the Savannah*, 230–1. There were also other arguments against recruiting Muslims. In 1931 Ft. Johnston district officer noted that 'the so-called Muhammedanism ... though it has the advantage of making its followers polite and cleanly seems to tend to an attitude which despises manual work'. MNA S/1/60 A-H/32: Ft. Johnston Annual Report, 1931.

<sup>52</sup> Some 1,750 soldiers in the Nyasaland battalions died during the war, three-quarters of them from disease, starvation or exhaustion. CO 534/25: Recruiting Situation, KAR, 1918; C. P. Fendall, *The East African Force, 1918–1919: An Unofficial Record of its Creation and Fighting Career; together with Some Account of the Civil and Administrative Conditions in East Africa before and during that Period* (London, 1921), 197–201; McCracken, 'British Central Africa', 621; and Page, *Chiwaya War*, 35–6 and 106. For the KAR in the First World War see Moyse-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 259–415; Page, *KAR*, 25–49; and Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 17–20. For Nyasaland soldiers in the Rhodesia Native Regiment see Page, *Chiwaya War*, 74–9.

and many young males were happy to receive any secure employment available. Moreover, if you did not volunteer, you were liable to be pressed to join the ever-increasing ranks of poorly paid carriers who worked under very harsh conditions. Almost 200,000 carriers were recruited in Nyasaland during the war. Although most served only for a limited period, this was an extremely high number compared to the total population figure of 970,000 counted in the last census before the war.<sup>53</sup>

Outside the northern border areas it was the Yao districts that suffered most during the war. The Tchiri (or Shire) valley was the main supply route for operations in southern Tanganyika and much labour from nearby districts was needed to keep it going. In Zomba and Ft. Johnston more than half the able-bodied adult males were pressed to serve as carriers at some point during the war. In Liwonde this figure rose perhaps to 75 per cent. The assumed martial nature of the Yao played also its part. Yao were thought to be naturally suited to the hardships of war, even as carriers.<sup>54</sup>

After the Great War finally ended in November 1918 Nyasaland continued to be a major source of KAR recruits. Although the protectorate accounted for only some 8 per cent of the total population of the British East African territories, it was expected to raise two of the six post-war KAR battalions with a strength of 450 men each.<sup>55</sup> One of these battalions was to garrison Tanganyika, which had become a British dependency. Faith in the inherent military virtues of the Yao also survived the war. An intelligence report listed their military characteristics as 'excellent. Good physically, intelligent and amenable to discipline', whereas for example the Nguru, a northern ethnic group, were dismissed as having 'not much military value'. Some groups were regarded as unfit for military service due to a physical trait, real or imagined. They might be judged to be generally too short to meet army requirements, too accustomed to some unusual diet, or simply too 'ugly'.<sup>56</sup>

It took time before ethnic companies could be reintroduced into the Nyasaland battalions after the confusion caused by the war. In 1928 the inspector general noted in his report of the Second (Nyasaland) Battalion:

I was not only surprised, but concerned, to find that the old tribal organisation had been broken up. I consider the tribal spirit should be maintained: it makes for rivalry and efficiency. It is also a factor of safety in case of unrest in Nyasaland.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> MNA S/1/946/19: The Empire at War, 18–20; Fendall, *East African Force*, 202–9; R. Gray, *Chronicle of the First World War*, II: 1917–1921 (Oxford and New York, 1991), 63; McCracken, 'British Central Africa', 621; Moyses-Bartlett, *King's African Rifles*, 414; J. R. Ngoleka Mlia, 'Demographic data resources for colonial Malawi', in Bruce Fetter (ed.), *Demography from Scanty Evidence: Central Africa in the Colonial Era* (Boulder CO and London, 1990), 90; Page, *Chiwaya War*, 30–54.

<sup>54</sup> Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 253–4.

<sup>55</sup> CO 534/34: Governor G. Smith to sec. of state for the colonies, 30 Aug. 1919. Although Tanganyikans had been recruited for service during the war, they were regarded as unreliable and it was proposed not to recruit them in the future. CO 534/41: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1919–20.

<sup>56</sup> MNA S/52/6/27: Intelligence report, June 1929. For a similar list of supposed ethnic qualities see MNA S/2/6/27: Nyasaland Handbook, 1922–6, Part III.

<sup>57</sup> CO 820/3/11: Inspection report, 2 KAR, 1928.



After remarking that the First (Nyasaland) Battalion had already re-adopted the 'tribal system ... with the happiest results' he instructed that it should also be restored in the Second Battalion. His advice was followed and two years later he was pleased to note that 'the Tribal organisation, by companies ... has now been completed. I trust it will be adhered to'.<sup>58</sup>

By now the British had realized the connection between the predominance of Yao volunteers and the location of Zomba garrison. The inspector general drew notice to:

The large number of recruits enlisted from the neighbourhood of Zomba, in the Yao Company. I understand that, as sufficient number of local recruits present themselves, no special efforts are made to obtain a better type of Yao from more distant parts of the Protectorate ... A possible reason for the shortage of recruits from outdistricts may be that no furlough is granted for three years after enlistment. The fact that there is no shortage of recruits from the vicinity of Zomba, where men can obtain weekend leave, tends to bear this out.<sup>59</sup>

While the effect of geography on the patterns of recruitment was thus finally acknowledged, this was constituted mainly as a problem for tapping a larger reserve of Yao volunteers. In 1930 the governor of Nyasaland sketched out his version of the ideal tribal balance among the protectorate's native soldiers:

The Battalion should be 50 per cent Yao, 25 per cent Atonga, and 25 per cent Angoni, and in a country ... where tribal distinctions are more marked than is usual in East Africa, it is important that the policy should be followed as closely as possible.<sup>60</sup>

It seems that the governor's views also carried some weight among the military. The last KAR intelligent report before the Second World War in June 1939 calculated that 58 per cent of the Nyasaland soldiers were Yao. However, some 29 per cent of the rest were in fact Man'ganja, and the Tonga and Ngoni had been reduced to small minorities.<sup>61</sup>

By now, the ethnic stereotype of the Yao had taken root both among the military and the colonial administration. As the Ft. Johnston district commissioner put it:

The Yao are of superior type, both physically and mentally, to the indigenous Nyanja. They make excellent soldiers, police, servants and skilled workmen ... As agriculturalists and labourers they are inclined to be lazy and do not take much interest in products of the soil, except those which can be sold ... This no doubt being due to their instinct for trade, which has come to them in the past from their close association with the Arabs.<sup>62</sup>

This was a description which early CAR recruiting officers would easily have recognized.

<sup>58</sup> CO 820/8/1: Inspection report, 2 KAR, 1930.

<sup>59</sup> CO 820/6/1: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1928.

<sup>60</sup> CO 820/10/15: Memorandum by the governor, 17 Dec. 1930.

<sup>61</sup> MNA KAR/3/3/2: Intelligence report, June 1939.

<sup>62</sup> MNA S/1/60 A-H/32: Ft. Johnston Annual Report, 1931. For a similar evaluation see CO 534/54: Inspection report, 1 KAR, 1924.

The same intelligence report which paraded Yao military virtues described the Ngoni as varying 'a great deal in quality. Require careful picking. Generally speaking the more pure bred they are the greater their military value'.<sup>63</sup> This was not a very flattering description of a people who might well have been regarded as a 'martial race' par excellence due to their violent past. The precolonial Ngoni chiefdoms had been based on brutal conquest and depopulation of land in order to provide free range for cattle. They had also resisted the British for longer than any other local polity. However, as already noted, the Ngoni resistance had excluded them from being a source of recruits for the early KAR. With their raid-and-cattle-based economy ruined by conquest, the impoverished Ngoni were forced to turn to wage labour on white plantations. The British military regarded this as a sign of a subservient nature and the Ngoni had already been labelled as 'non-martial' by the time they were allowed to volunteer for the newly created KAR in 1903.<sup>64</sup>

The time of the 'martial races' was nearing its end. The Second World War again triggered a major expansion of the KAR, making it a virtual army by itself. Logistics, communications, weaponry and training achieved levels quite unimaginable to the soldiers of the pre-war KAR. No fewer than 400,000 Africans served in the British military during the war and Nyasaland was again a central recruiting area. The KAR fought the Italians in Ethiopia, the French in Madagascar and even the Japanese in Burma.<sup>65</sup>

In the middle of all this the old KAR disappeared for good. Ethnically based companies were again given up during the mass recruitment. This time they were never to return. Time had finally caught up with preferences for 'martial races'. Ethnic distinctions among local groups were gradually obliterated by the emerging colonial society. Assumed 'tribal' characteristics, always fluid and vague at best, were now even less discernible than before. Moreover, the post-war generation of British officers was also perhaps less prepared to ascribe to the racial concepts of their predecessors. After the war it again took several years to organize the KAR back to a peace-time footing. By the early 1950s, the British Empire was already in irreversible decline and ethnically based companies were no longer an African issue.

What, if anything, had the British obsession with ethnicity meant for the Yao themselves? Their martial status had probably helped them to maintain something of their prestige as the former rulers of the land. Furthermore,

<sup>63</sup> MNA S/52/6/27: Intelligence report, June 1929.

<sup>64</sup> J. K. Rennie, 'The Ngoni states and European intrusion', in E. Stokes and R. Brown (eds.), *The Zambesian Past: Studies in Central African History* (Manchester, 1966), 322-4; and Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 117.

<sup>65</sup> R. Gray, *The Two Nations: Aspects of Race Relations in the Rhodesias and Nyasaland*, Part II (London, 1960), 343; D. Killingray and R. Rathbone, 'Introduction', in D. Killingray and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Africans in the Second World War* (Basingstoke and London, 1986), 14. Nyasaland battalions remained distinct from other KAR battalions by their use of Chewa instead of Swahili as their language of command. Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 25. For a general evaluation of Africans in the Second World War see R. Headrick, 'African Soldiers in World War II', *Armed Forces and Society*, 4 (1978), 501-20. For the post-war KAR see Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 35-46, 91-7, 146-58 and 209-16.

assimilation with the Yao continued among their neighbours during colonial times. As was remarked in the census of 1921:

The Yaos [have] ... ceased for the most part to be a clear-cut division of the Bantu race. In South Nyasa, for instance, the Nyanja [i.e. the Man'ganja] have so imitated and intermarried with them that it is impossible to differentiate accurately between the two tribes, more especially as the Nyanja have to a great extent adopted the tribal markings of the Yao.<sup>66</sup>

The military authorities also noted that Man'ganja and Chewa recruits sometimes hoped to profit by trying to 'pass themselves off as Yaos, who are regarded as a superior type of native'.<sup>67</sup>

To be sure, the ethnic identity of the Yao was not merely, or even principally, due to their military reputation. They continued to be heavily involved in the retail trade and came to be widely known as traders. They also profiled themselves as Muslims. This distinguished them, among other things, by their use of traditional dress instead of European clothes adopted by other Africans. It also caused them to distance themselves from Western education. In addition to all this, military fame could only bolster Yao self-reliance.<sup>68</sup>

Equally, whatever ethnic pride the Yao may have felt by being labelled as a 'martial race', it could not prevent the effects of European colonialism from loosening their communal relations. The money and experience gained by ex-soldiers, especially the veterans of the Great War, served further to erode Yao kinship ties. Matrilineages no longer controlled the distribution of prestige and wealth among individuals and the young veterans were able to challenge the weakening authority of the traditional leaders. Seeing their world coming apart, a number of Yao elders led their followers to a remote district in Tanganyika after the First World War. For them, isolation seemed the only way to safeguard their community and religion from the influence of the missions and the colonial society.<sup>69</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The Yao became regarded as a 'martial race' through a complicated process in which the key factor was a tendency among British colonial officers to think of their native soldiers in racial stereotypes. Following a concept formulated during the conquest of India, the colonial military believed that individual martial values and physical traits were to a large extent determined by ethnic background. Still, this was not the sole reason for creating ethnically uniform companies for the CAR/KAR. By forming locally recruited soldiers into 'tribal' military units, the British hoped to improve unit coherence and to create positive competition among companies. Even more

<sup>66</sup> MNA S/1/667/21: Comments on the Census, 13 July 1921.

<sup>67</sup> MNA S/1/667/21: Comments on the Census, 13 July 1921. Also MNA S/1/60 A-H/32: Liwonde Annual Report, 1931.

<sup>68</sup> Vaughan, 'Social and economic change', 261–2, 285–6 and 300–7.

<sup>69</sup> T. O. Ranger, 'African reactions to the imposition of colonial rule in East and Central Africa', in L. H. Gann and P. Duignan (eds.), *Colonialism in Africa 1870–1960*, 1: *The History and Politics of Colonialism 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 1969), 158–9.

importantly, ethnically balanced native units were regarded as a crucial safety measure against mutinies.

Due to prevailing racial concepts the British also wanted to discover which 'tribes' were naturally best suited for soldiering. There were several reasons why the colonial military almost from the beginning chose the Yao as the 'martial race' of Nyasaland. Although the ethnic identity of the Yao was in fact no less ambiguous and volatile than was the case with other local groups, the position of the former Yao chiefdoms could be interpreted as a sign of a dominant race controlling others. Furthermore, the Yao were thought to fit well the physical and mental requirements demanded of colonial soldiers. Their past was proof of their warlike character and even their adoption of Islam could be construed to reveal a 'semi-civilized' and disciplined nature.

What originally brought the Yao to the attention of the colonial military was, however, mostly the simple fact that they showed up in greater numbers than any other ethnic group. The British had originally expected the Tonga to form the largest group of volunteers due to their long contact with European missionaries. When this proved not to be the case, colonial officers were ready to welcome the Yao instead. After the new recruits had turned out to be suitable material for military service, it was quickly concluded that the Yao were indeed the best soldiers in Nyasaland. The military found no reason to change this opinion later and it became the cornerstone of British recruitment policy in Nyasaland until the Second World War.

The most obvious explanation for the large number of Yao volunteers during the early days of the CAR/KAR is that the recruitment office was situated at Zomba, which was easily accessible from Yao-dominated areas. There were also hundreds of ex-musketeers who had previously served the Yao chiefs and who were now in need of new employment. They already had a thirst for new warfare and the use of firearms and might well have sought to continue their military careers under a new master. Later, when the ex-musketeers could no longer bolster the ranks of the new recruits, a deep economic depression in the Yao areas helped to maintain a steady flow of Yao volunteers for the army. The British also began to favour the recruitment of the 'martial' Yao and thus made military service more attractive for them.

The Yao continued to dominate the ranks of the Nyasaland battalions and, later, the Malawian army, even after there was no longer any talk of 'martial races'. Army work had become a viable choice of employment for young Yao males. They could draw on the experiences of previous generations and might sometimes have felt pressure from relatives with a military past to join the army. While in service, ethnic comradeship provided the Yao with an advantage in pursuing their army careers which might lead to the rank of officer. After independence, the small Malawian army was not to play the role in politics that it did in many other young African states. Thus, Yao dominance in the military has not led to grave ethnic-political complications. Whatever political validity the Yao in uniform have in modern Malawi seems to have more to do with their religion and their role in the economy than with their military past.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup> For the post-war KAR and East African society see Parsons, *African Rank-and-File*, 231–74.