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AN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF SOUTHERN MALAWI

Land and People of the Shire Highlands



Brian Morris



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An Environmental History of Southern Malawi

Land and People of the Shire Highlands

palgrave
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Palgrave Studies in World Environmental History
ISBN 978-3-319-45257-9 ISBN 978-3-319-45258-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-45258-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016958800

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Cover image © Typical village in Southern Malawi: set in a clearing within *Brachystegia* woodland circa 1950. Source: D. Arnall, Nyasaland Information Department.

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

To those pioneers of environmental anthropology: Roy Ellen and Tim Ingold.

PREFACE

I first came to Malawi—then Nyasaland—in February 1958, sitting with my rucksack in the back of a pick-up truck as it passed through Fort Manning (Mchinji) customs post. I had spent the previous four months hitch-hiking around southern and central Africa, mostly sleeping rough. During that time I encountered no other hitch-hiker and very few tarred roads, and the only place I met tourists was at the Victoria Falls. I was however, so attracted to Malawi and its people that I decided to give up my nomadic existence. I was fortunate to find a job working as a tea planter for Blantyre and East Africa Ltd, an old Scottish company founded by Robert Hynde and Ross Stark around the turn of the century. This company had earlier been an integral part—as discussed in the book—of the history of colonial Malawi, for the company had pioneered the growing of fire-cured tobacco through tenant farming as well as the production of tea in both the Thyolo and Mulanje district. I was to spend over seven years (1958–1965) as a tea planter working in the Thyolo (Zoa estate) and Mulanje (Limbuli estate) districts. I spent much of my spare time in natural history pursuits, my primary interests being small mammals (especially mice), the flora of Mulanje Mountain, and the epiphytic orchids of the Shire Highlands. I formed close friendships with many well-known naturalists, such as Arthur Westrop, Rodney Wood, ‘G-D’ Hayes, Peter Hanney and Geoff Harrison, as well as with botanists and foresters such as Jim Chapman, George Welsh and Dave Cornelius. I also spent many, many hours digging up mice with local Africans, or climbing into the hills on botanical expeditions, either with my wife Jacqui or with an African companion. I still have the fondest memories of these companions, men

such as Jimu Bomani, Benson Zuwani and Nyalugwe Chibati. As I was then only in my early twenties all these men were much older than myself. My close friend Arthur Westrop in fact, whom I accompanied on many natural history excursions—he was an accomplished and pioneer wildlife film-maker—was some 43 years my senior! My spare-time natural history pursuits led to the publication of many articles—on the ecology, habits and folk knowledge of small mammals, on the wild flowers of Mulanje Mountain, and on the epiphytic orchids of the Shire Highlands, as well as a book on the latter subject (Morris 1964, 1970, 2009).

In 1979–1980 I returned to Malawi after qualifying as a teacher at Brighton College of Education and studying anthropology at the London School of Economics. Based at Makwawa near Domasi, the year was spent engaged in ethno-botanical researches, and I travelled widely throughout the Shire Highlands, usually accompanied by a local herbalist. With my companions and informants I spent many hours studying plants and their medicinal uses in the *Brachystegia* woodlands, or accompanying a group of women collecting edible fungi in the same woodland setting. I became particularly well acquainted with the Chinyenyedi valley near Zoa tea estate, the foothills of Malosa Mountain, and the evergreen forests of Soche and Ndirande Mountains.

Again, I continue to have warm memories of my woodland companions—my mentors in the local culture—and may I mention in particular Salimu Chinyangala, Pilato Mbasa, Chijonijazi Shumba, Efe Ncharawati, Jafali Zomba, Nitta Sulemani, Rosebey Mponda and Samson Waiti. My ethno-botanical researches were published in many articles and books—on the sociology of herbalism, folk classifications, medicinal plants, weeds and edible fungi (Morris 1984, 1987, 1996a, 2009; Banda and Morris 1986).

In the year 1990–1991 I again renewed my interest in Malawi, and returned to the Shire Highlands to undertake research studies in human–animal relationships, specifically people’s relations to mammalian life. Again based at Makwawa near Domasi, I travelled widely throughout the year, but nevertheless spent many weeks exploring Mchemba hill near Migowi, and the nearby Mchese and Mulanje Mountains, invariably accompanied by a local hunter. At this period I was deeply indebted to the support and help of several friends and informants—especially Paul Kotokwa, Wyson Bowa, Heronimo Luke, Davison Potani and Ganda Makalani. My researches led to publication of several articles and books on the history and cultural aspects of the mammals of Malawi (Morris 1998, 2000, 2006A, 2009: 169–311).

My researches during the year 2000–2001 were in a sense a follow up of my earlier animal studies, but they focussed specifically on the anthropology of insect life. This time I was based at Kapalasa farm near Namadzi, and although I travelled widely throughout Malawi I spent much time in the Shire Highlands. This was particularly so with respect to studies of bee-keeping (at Zoa estate), insects as a food resource (Kapalasa farm and the surrounding villages), agricultural pests (Makoka research station) and with regard to the insect pests of coffee and tea (Mulanje). My researches I wrote up as a comprehensive ethnographic study of insect life in Malawi (Morris 2004).

Finally, I returned to Malawi in 2009 (January—June) mainly to study subsistence agriculture and to undertake archival research with respect to the present study.

From the above reflections it may be recognized that I have spent more than a decade of my life, living, working and researching in the Shire Highlands. In fact I have spent more than a year residing in four separate rural locations—Domasi, Namadzi, Thyolo and Mulanje. I have climbed and explored almost every hill and mountain in the Shire Highlands, usually with a Malawian as my companion, guide and mentor—looking for birds, mammals, medicinal plants, epiphytic orchids, fungi or insects (especially edible caterpillars and cicadas)—whichever was my current interest. Some of my most memorable life experiences have therefore been in Malawi, and many of most closest and cherished friendships have been with Malawians or with ‘expatriates’ who have spent their lives in Malawi.

All the above experiences constitute a real preface to the present study, for the Shire Highlands landscape and its people have long been inextricably linked to my own life and to my vocation as a university teacher in anthropology.

With respect to the present book I would like to thank in particular the following who have long given me friendship, support and hospitality: Father Claude Boucher, Shay Busman, Janet and the late Les Doran, Cornell Dudley, Vera and the late Rev. Peter Garland, John Kajalwiche, the late Colin Lees, John and Anne Killick, Martin Ott, Kings Phiri, Hassam Patel, Frances and Annabel Shaxson, June and the late Brian Walker, the late Jessie Williamson and John and Fumiyo Wilson.

With regard to my more recent researches in Malawi I would very much like to thank Carl Bruessow and Mike Bamford of the Society of Malawi, Paul Kishindo and Paul Kakhongwe of the Centre for Social Research,

Chancellor College, Joel Thaulo and Zione Banda at the National Archives, Dilys and Paul Taylor, and Angela Travis for all their help and support.

Finally, I should like to express my thanks to my family and to my colleagues at Goldsmiths College for continuing support, and to my friend Sheila Camfield for kindly typing up the manuscript.

April 2, 2015
London, UK

Brian Morris

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Chilembwe Rebellion against the colonial state in January 1915 an earlier version of Chapter Six was published in *The Society of Malawi journal*, volume 68/1: 20–52.

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GLOSSARY

A short glossary of some important terms in the Chinyanja language for kin and kinship relations; social-structuring objects, places, rituals and relationships; large-scale environmental factors (climate, landscape); and materials. Terms in Chinyanja and other languages of the region for plants and animals; domestic, agricultural and manufacturing objects and activities; detailed social structures and relationships; nicknames and titles of groups and individuals; and many other matters will be found throughout the text.

<i>ambuye</i>	grandparents
<i>banja</i>	family, home, household
<i>bwalo</i>	cleared space in centre of village
<i>chibale</i>	kinship, friendship
<i>chilimwe</i>	dry season
<i>chinamwali</i>	general term for initiation rites
<i>chiroombo</i>	wild animal; useless or obnoxious organism
<i>chirope</i>	blood, ailment associated with hunting, ritual eating of meat
<i>chizimba</i>	activating medicine
<i>chulu</i>	termite mound
<i>dambo</i>	marsh, valley glades/ grassland
<i>dimba</i>	valley gardens
<i>dothe</i>	soil
<i>dziko</i>	country land
<i>dzinja</i>	rainy season

<i>jando</i>	boys' circumcision ritual among the Yao
<i>kachisi</i>	small hut or shrine where sacrificial offerings are made to the spirits
<i>lupanda</i>	boys' initiation rite among Yao
<i>makhaliidwe</i>	disposition, nature, character
<i>maliro</i>	funerary rites
<i>malume</i>	maternal uncle
<i>manda</i>	forested graveyard
<i>mankhwala</i>	medicinal substances
<i>mathuthu</i>	mound
<i>matsenga</i>	sorcery, trick, mysterious happening
<i>matsoka</i>	ill-luck, misfortunes
<i>maula</i>	divination
<i>mbumba</i>	matrilineal or sorority group
<i>mfiti</i>	witch
<i>mfumu</i>	chief or village headman
<i>mkamwini</i>	in-marrying male affine, son-in-law
<i>mlamu</i>	affine of own generation (pl. <i>alamu</i>)
<i>m'michira</i>	ritual specialist or healer (who possesses medicine tail, <i>mchira</i>)
<i>moto</i>	fire
<i>mowa</i>	beer
<i>mudzi</i>	village
<i>mulungu</i>	common name for the divinity
<i>munda</i>	upland garden
<i>munthu</i>	person
<i>mvula</i>	rain
<i>mwali</i>	initiate
<i>mwambo</i>	tradition
<i>mwayi</i>	good fortune, luck
<i>mwezi</i>	moon, month, menstruation
<i>mwini</i>	owner, guardian
<i>mzimu</i>	spirit (of the ancestors) (pl. <i>mizimu</i>)
<i>mzinda</i>	large village
<i>namkungwi</i>	ritual leader at initiation rites or in spirit rituals
<i>ndiwo</i>	relish
<i>ngaliba</i>	circumcision in Yao boys' initiation
<i>nganjo</i>	iron furnace
<i>nsembe</i>	offerings to the spirits of the ancestors or the divinities

<i>nyama</i>	wild game, meat
<i>nyau</i>	ritual fraternity among men, masked dancers or initiation rites
<i>nyengo</i>	season
<i>nyumba</i>	house, home
<i>phiri</i>	hill, mountain
<i>tchire</i>	woodland, usually regenerate bush
<i>thangata</i>	a system of labour rent
<i>thengo</i>	woodland
<i>visoso</i>	shifting cultivation

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Introduction: An Environmental History of Malawi

Situated in Southern Malawi, to the east of the Great Rift Valley and the river Shire, the Shire Highlands form a ‘plateau’ region, as the missionary-explorer David Livingstone described it, mainly at an elevation of between 2000 and 3500 feet (610–1067 m). Hailed as a well-watered and ‘delightful country’ by his compatriot John Buchanan (1885: 41), the plateau is surrounded by a range of hills and high mountains that form a crescent to the west and south of the Lake Chilwa basin, which itself lies on the plateau of 2000 ft.

Although archaeological evidence has indicated that the Shire Highlands has been inhabited by humans from the very earliest times, when Buchanan and other Europeans settled in the highlands towards the end of the nineteenth century—for it was deemed to be a healthy landscape for Europeans—it was described as ‘well-wooded’ and as largely ‘unoccupied’.

This book aims to provide a history of the people of the Shire Highlands—both Africans and Europeans—from the late nineteenth century until the end of the colonial period. Written from an anthropological perspective, the study is offered as a contribution to environmental history, in that it seeks to explore the inter-relationship between the people of the Shire Highlands and the natural world.

When in 1980 I gave a talk on ‘Changing Views of Nature’ to the Wildlife Society of Malawi (Morris 1996b [1982]: 25–36) the number

of books then available that dealt specifically with people's conceptions of nature (or wildlife) could almost be counted on the fingers of one hand, and environmental history had hardly emerged as a field of study (but see Collingwood 1945; Glacken 1967; Nash 1967; Barbour 1973). The famous introduction to history by Edward Carr, *What is History?* (1964) hardly mentions the natural world, and the same could be said for many introductions to social anthropology available when I was a student. As far as most philosophers, anthropologists and historians were concerned, nature was simply the existential backcloth that could be safely ignored in studies of the human life. There were, of course, notable and important exceptions. The geographer Clarence Glacken (1967), for example, wrote a superb historical account of changing attitudes towards nature—specifically the earth as the 'abode' of humans—within Western culture from the ancient Greeks to the end of the eighteenth century. The *Annales* school of French historiography, associated with such pioneer scholars as Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, stressed the crucial importance of the natural environment—particularly with respect to landscapes, climate and disease epidemics—in understanding the vicissitudes of human life (Braudel 1980; Worster 1988: 291; Burke 1990). Likewise, in the United States, what has been described as the frontier and Western school of American historiography—scholars such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Walter Prescott Webb and James Malin—explored the impact of human settlement on the Great Plains of North America. They thereby initiated an ecological approach to history (Worster 1988: 291; Hughes 2006: 35).

Within anthropology, the pioneer figure is Julian Steward—whose work often tends to be ignored by environmental historians. Steward's cultural ecology sought to explore the adaptation of human cultures to their natural environments and to advance a theory of multilineal cultural evolution (Steward 1955; Kerns 2003). Nor must we forget the illuminating studies of urban life by Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford which came to encapsulate an ecological approach to human life. As Mumford famously expressed it: 'All thinking worthy of the name must be ecological.' Their approach came to be known as social ecology; an approach further developed by the eco-socialist Murray Bookchin and the microbiologist René Dubos. Although both these scholars were seminal figures in the development of the environmental movement in the 1970s, they also tend to be by-passed by environmental historians (Mumford 1970: 393; Morris 2012; cf. Hughes 2006; Radkau 2014).