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The Locality of Chieftainship: Territory, Authority and Local Politics in Northern Malawi, 1870-1974

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Summary

Discussions about colonial chieftaincy in Africa have tended to focus upon the ways in which indirect rule structured and framed traditional authority; for the majority of contemporary historians of British colonialism the question has been to what extent Lugard's blueprint for effective native administration, *The Dual Mandate*, invented, shaped, and restructured *political and social identity*. Whilst acknowledging the importance of this neo-traditional perspective which focuses much on how colonial frameworks *ethnicised* and *tribalised* African society, this thesis argues that indirect rule was as much a *spatialising* process as it was a tribalising one. Colonial tools of territoriality mapped politics in geographically bounded ways and as a result associating power with place began to assume new importance in the ways African leadership was defined, and given authority. By further exploring the spatial context of traditional power in colonial Malawi through the example of a chief named Timothy Chawinga, this thesis reveals new conclusions about the nature of chieftainship there.

The accounts of Chawinga, and other peripheral chiefs like him, have been sifted out of the story of Malawi as they do not fit with the questions which historians have typically tended to address of this period and with the political geography that has been favoured for contextualizing chiefly behaviour. This favoured political geography has rather drawn out examples from places where "things happen": where significant cash crop schemes were implemented and radically transformed farmers lives for the better and worse; where co-operative movements politicised the local population; where conservation measures were harshly and violently enforced; and where chiefs rebelled and vocally took part in the nationalist struggles. Concentrating on highly visible areas, which were economically or politically important to the state leads into making wrong assumptions about the character of the colonial state and the patterns of state intervention in colonial Malawi. The forms of rule and governance were multiple and reflected the dynamic association between administrative institutions and other institutional practices found in the everyday associational life of people.

In Africanist historiography the spatial turn has enabled scholars to move away from these political narratives of the nation-state towards discussions about the ways in which a wide range of actors contest different kinds of political, economic, social and religious space for their own gain. Surprisingly, however, the spatial turn is only beginning to have an impact on the way in which the production of chiefly authority in Africa is understood. The notion of *locality* is used as the central conceptual tool in this thesis, since it can accommodate both the historicity and spatial specificity of chieftainship. It is argued that the locality of chieftainship is the most crucial factor in determining colonial chiefly identity; in other words, the geographical boundaries drawn up in the context of indirect rule offered chiefs opportunities to exploit the material and spiritual resources within these bounded spaces in new, sometimes highly productive, ways which were crucial for increasing both their customary authority and personal fortune. For as much as indirect rule enabled the reach of the Native Authority, through customary law, to gain authority over social domains like the household, it also gave many chiefs the opportunity to assert a territoriality over space, over land, and over fixed natural resources as they never had done before.

By re-locating the historiographical gaze upon "regional" and "local" landscapes it is argued that historians can better catalogue the diversity in these opportunities to act territorially. Timothy Chawinga – the main protagonist of this story – became the fifteenth Chief Katumbi in 1942. He successfully ruled over a modest territory of about 200 square miles in north-western Colonial Malawi for a period of 31 years, growing in regional prowess

throughout this time. This thesis presents evidence of how Chawinga employed the strategy of *territoriality* – the control of people and things by controlling an area – to do this. In order to understand the mechanics of this strategy it is argued that Chawinga should not be considered simply as “a Native Authority”; one cannot get a sense of how varied chiefs’ position and roles were if this reductive perspective is taken. Furthermore, whilst national policy changes in Native Administration did have some bearing on what was expected from chiefs such as Chawinga, it did not create the same framework of opportunity for everyone; especially since local conditions had the effect of producing different expressions of indirect rule chief. This thesis uses the example of Timothy Chawinga, therefore, to unsettle assumptions about the determining role of the state in the production of local authority.

The thesis moves away from treating Timothy Chawinga’s Hewe, the place of his chieftainship, as merely a conventional geographical space. Rather, Hewe represented a set of relations between things as well as a space which contained and dissimulated social relations. At the height of his powers, this thesis argues, Chawinga contributed significantly to the production of Hewe as a locality, by constructing as a structure of feeling, a property of social life, and an ideology of a “situated community” for his own purposes; primarily the extraction of wealth and power. The result being that in between 1942-1974 *the space* in which Timothy Chawinga practiced his authority was used by him as a powerful “tool of thought and of action”, not simply as a place in which he could perform his administrative, and formal, role as Native Authority. Whilst he did take advantage of the position which the state enabled to use tradition and custom, perhaps most important was his ability to build his authority through a material exploitation of his land; this had not been a main pathway to power in the past. Prior to the period of European expansion claims to having a territorial identity hardly figured in the political imagination of African leaders who mainly grew their wealth and power by capturing people rather than gaining control over territory. Chawinga and his contemporaries were using their new “customary rights” to contest borders and boundaries in ways their forebears had never considered useful and to allocate access to land to “natives” whilst denying it to “strangers”; the ramifications of which continue to unfold today.

As well as reconsidering the spatial context of chiefly authority, this thesis calls for our analyses of local authority to be placed within a deeper historical time-scale. Chieftainships are constructed and contested within the context of rural histories and regional contestations, *as well as* through the eyes of the State. Timothy Chawinga inherited a title which was loaded with certain meanings but was an economic and political leadership that was flexible in its inheritance structures and rested upon an authority that could be easily co-opted by charismatic individuals. Less marked by centralised ritual authorities and more by mobility, interdependence and varied involvement in trading networks, the *Balowoka* chiefly tradition - of which the Katumbi chieftaincy is a part - had been highly adaptable even in the pre-colonial period. Wielding only a loose grasp on ritual authority, as they did and still do, the fight to grab a more formal authority is therefore a constant feature of the chiefly political landscape of these Tumbuka communities. With each chiefly succession, authority has needed to be reasserted and maintained. Since these chieftainships had been established with new royal lineages which lacked significant depth, there was plenty of room for new interpretations of authority and more spaces in which individual people with power could challenge the tradition.

As authority became more easily sanctioned through performance than heritable privilege, at least by the beginning of the twentieth century, personality politics thrived amongst the *Balowoka* chieftainships. Bearing this milieu in mind, alongside a new spatial analysis, this thesis presents the emergence of Timothy Chawinga as a regionally significant, charismatic

personality whose concern lay primarily with the protection of his position within the regional political and moral economy. His personal vision did not in fact extend much beyond the pursuit and production of authority within his own and his immediately neighbouring territories. That he was able to pursue this agenda, and develop a strong territorial claim over the Hewe Valley, as a geography and a place of social relations, has much to do with the limited geographical and economic significance which Hewe had, if we “see” it as the colonial state might have. Hewe’s position in the eyes of the administration inevitably enabled this regional locality to emerge as it did, and as such enabled Timothy Chawinga to practice a territoriality that served, in various ways, to augment his historically specific customary authority.

Making statements as to what extent colonial chiefs were “invented” or “authentic”, “traditionalists” or “modernisers” as much of the historiography is wont to do is considered ineffectual. This thesis argues that questions should be posed which bring no structural, temporal or spatial assumptions. A more apt line of questioning revolves around the nature and use of authority rather than upon the structures in which authority supposedly operates: *Where do chiefs in the colonial period draw their authority from? What does this authority enable them to do? And what are the stakes involved in having it?* When Chawinga was arrested in 1974 by the Malawi Congress Party government of Hastings Banda, the matrix of factors that had shaped his particular brand of territorial politics had shifted. The colonial framework of indirect rule had enabled Chawinga to grow in personal wealth and power, but at independence he was confronted with new challenges which transformed his opportunities to accumulate authority through territoriality. Hewe was transformed from peripheral “border zone”, with little attention being paid to it, to that of crucial “border post”, a key check point in the war against Hastings Banda’s political rivals and unwelcome neighbours. The tension which these changes produced between this chief and the post-colonial state ultimately led to his downfall.

