

POPULAR SONGS AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MALAWI

by

DR. GEORGE T. NURSE

Has there ever been a nation which had no need of symbols around which to resolve itself? The multiplicity and multiformity of flags, the philatelic uniqueness so carefully cherished by even the smallest lands, would make this seem improbable. Few territorial autonomies have been established without a struggle of some sort, and each such struggle breeds its own symbols. As accretions to history swell national pride, brawls and riots come to figure as battles in a war of independence, and the deaths of participants to be elevated in popular mythology to the status of martyrdom.

“1953 *anafa ambili*”, sing the people of Malawi, accurately enough,
“*Ena anapbedwa* 1959.”

“Many died in 1953: more were killed in 1959”.

Martyrs are powerful symbols to rally round. Where they are numerous and nameless, their *mana* is all the more potent: they might have been anyone, another you, another me: they become, to the people who sing about them, themselves. This is a process very evident in the past of more familiar lands: it is what happened not only to William the Silent, to Andreas Hofer and to William Wallace, but also to the victims of Diocletian, the *klephtes* of the Morea and the Protestants who died at the stake under Mary Tudor. A cause in the defence or promulgation of which people have been made to give their lives acquires an immense accession of strength, even when the deaths have hardly been voluntary; where there is, as in most nationally significant cases, an element of sacrifice, this is greatly heightened.

If martyrdom has the most immediate popular appeal when a people requires symbols with which to identify its national spirit, the imprisonment of one of its heroes can evoke a response that is almost as strong.

“*Kanjedza linali khola*
Losungiramo anthu.”

“*Kanjedza*” (the prison where Dr. Banda was first confined in 1959) “was the cage in which the people were preserved.”)

This, too, is a tendency which can be illustrated from the histories of better-known countries. The young United States forgot internal discords and embarked on its first foreign war when American sailors were imprisoned and enslaved in Tripoli; and the unsympathetic Terje Vigen, captured by the English,

“*Han satt i prisonen i lange aar,*
det sies, i fulle fem,
hans nakke bøyet seg, graatt ble hans haar,
av drømmene om hans hjem.”

“He sat in the prison for many a year — it is said, five at least. His neck became bowed, and his hair grey, from dreaming about his home.”
gave a quite unexpected impetus to the Norwegian search for national identity and independence. In fact, if the deaths of martyrs can be said to provoke the fiercest feelings in favour of the principles for which they are believed to have died, the incarceration of heroes may come to represent the period of consolidation of those principles. Immediate acts lead to immediate consequences, but protracted withdrawal, still at a level pregnant with symbolism, is necessary if the consequences are to have lasting effects.

Both of these talismanic experiences, being concerned with actual people, have a far greater appeal to the emotions than the abstractions for the sake of which they are suffered; and yet, in the formation of the feeling of nationhood, the principles on which the nation is based have to be expressed. Thought divorced from symbol has little popular appeal; it is hard for the generality to love; but if negative symbols are provided for its opposites, the easier and less committed emotion of hatred can be employed, and the desired principles established in affection by a process of rebound.

“Scatter our enemies
And make them fall.
Frustrate their politics,
Confound their knavish tricks”

To be utterly effective, such expressions of dislike have to be couched in an idiom acceptable to the people, and to have a somewhat less than subtle appeal.

“*Coka Kapilikoni,*
Coka Kapilikoni,
Coka Kapilikoni usandinunkitse”

“Off with you, Capricorn, and don't make me stink”.

They and the other demotic manifestations of national spirit have to be capable of publication, of reaching a wide circle of people. They have to be familiar in material and content and vivid in style, and of a type that can be held in the mind of the individual and easily reproduced when required. In short, they need to be part of popular art.

There can be little doubt that, in the more sophisticated countries, the function of popular art is filled almost entirely by the press. Anyone who has any literary or graphic aspirations, or any strong desire to make his opinions publicly known, stands a good chance of having his tales or sketches or photographs, or his letters to the editor, reproduced in some sort of periodical, be it only a market-town gazette or a parish magazine. The printed word, the picture hung at a regional exhibition and reviewed in the local newspaper, satisfy the unambitious in their desire for self-expression; and any of the other arts, however inexpertly practised, will generally merit some mention in the press. Where, however, the standard of literacy is not high, and communications are rather less easy, the transmission of ideas and of popular artistic experience has to depend to a very great extent on the handing-on of particular patterns of sound. These may be purely informative, advice or instruction; they may be delectative, noises with little verbal meaning but pleasant to performer and audience; or they may, by a combination of the two modes, have a double significance and a double effect.

There are few occasions so unimportant that the Bantu African will not improvise a song about them. A village quirk or joke, a broken drum or a trapped bird, all are of sufficient interest to be sung about for a few days and then, perhaps, forgotten. The gossip-column is the woman who sings as she pounds or winnows the grain, the news-headline the man on a journey who croons a few words over the jingling of his *mbira*. When the news is of great moment, of concern to a series of villages, a tribe, or the whole land, the tune to which the words are sung preserves them in their correct form and order and constitutes a safeguard against any tampering with their substance. Regard for factual accuracy, and the villager's frequent indifference to opinions other than his own, are variously served in this way. Narrative remains immutable, and views, made familiar by repetition, become easier to accept.

Whether the popular songs of patriotic and political turn at present current in Malawi are the products of such a genesis as this, or whether they have been deliberately devised and fostered to take advantage of these tendencies, it is impossible to say. Certain of them appear to have arisen spontaneously in connection with historic occasions. One, for instance, celebrating the return of Dr. Banda to the country in 1958, starts off with a statement of general patriotic sentiment,

*"Taombolodwa a Malawi,
Taamboledwa ku mabvuto"*

("We have been delivered, people of Malawi, ransomed from oppression"), rises to a climax which, sung by a large crowd, can be quite moving,

*"Tsiku! Tsiku labwino la Ngwazi Kamuzu!
Nyimbo zinamveka m'mwamba, m'wamba"*

("Day! O great day of the Leader, Kamuzu! Songs were to be heard on high, in heaven".) and then ends on a note of quite extraordinary bathos:

*"Oyitanidwa kudzaona Kamuzu
Anasonkhana pa Cileka"*

("Those who had been summoned to see Kamuzu assembled at Cileka airport".)

This decline in mood from the ecstatic to the entirely factual, almost a reversal of the emotional sequentiality one would expect, leads one to suppose that this song, at least, was made up by an unsophisticated person. On the other hand, some of the shorter songs, more simply worded and of wider relevance, show an acuity and directness of political sense that suggest a rather more calculating and purposeful authorship:

*"Palibe mfumu yina
Yoposa Kamuzu",* sings the soloist; and a chorus replies:
*"O! Inde, walanda dziko
Ndi mau okha"*

("There is no other chief who surpasses Kamuzu. Oh, yes, he has gained the country by his words alone").

Certain others refer to occasions which have become permanent. A song called on the people to enrol in the Malawi Congress Party:

Solo: *"A Malawi, dulani card — dzikoli ndi lanu".*

Chorus: *"Ndi lanu, dulani card — ndi lanu, dulani card. Dzikoli ndi lanu"*

("People of Malawi, get yourselves cards — this land is yours").

Not all of these songs are applicable all over the country. Independence brought many changes, and in the district where the present writer is living not the least significant was the reconstitution of the Gomani chieftainship. Following an unusually determined resistance by Inkosi Philip Gomani, Paramount Chief of the Central Province Angoni, to the inauguration of the Federation in 1953, the chieftainship ceased to be recognized by the colonial government. Not unnaturally, the old chief's son and eventual successor, Inkosi Willard Gomani, maintained a resolute opposition to Federation, and at independence was installed in the position his father had held — becoming also, incidentally, a member of the first Malawi Parliament. The people sang:

Solo: *"Willard ndiye! Mfumu ya Malawi,
Wabwela lero takondwela".*

Chorus: *"Takondwela, O! takondwela,
Wabwela lero takondwela"*

("Willard is he! Chief of Malawi, today he has come and we are happy").

Among all these expressions of loyalty, part of the constant process of renewal of the sense of uniqueness of the nation, the hymns of hate against old antagonists, from the frequency and virulence with which they are sung, stand prominently out. Dr. Kamuzu Banda returned in 1958 to Nyasaland, as it then was, with the express and avowed purpose of destroying the Federation. In this he succeeded; and his people, understandably enough, regard this as the greatest national victory, for him and them, in their history. Two main targets of scorn are set up and abused: Sir Roy Welensky, a political Aunt Sally, justly or unjustly blamed as much for his failure as for the inequities which were said to attend his regime; and an ideological bogey, the Capricorn Society. This latter may seem, to those unacquainted with local history, an object unworthy of

such pronounced disdain: its aims were benevolent, its actions mild, and it stood for a broad and tolerant policy which many people admired. It was just because of this that it proved so dangerous. When, in the eyes of Dr. Banda and his party, it was most necessary that the whole effort of the people should be devoted to the downfall of Federation, several politically prominent persons were induced to give their support to the Capricornists, who comprised the only organization which might, arguably, have made Federation work. This seemed the grossest treachery to those who sought a separate existence for Malawi; the bitterness engendered by such a *volte-face* persists.

Solo: "*Welensky akufuna dziko, Kapilikoni*".

Chorus: "*Coka, coka, usakhale pano,
Nsabwe zanu tenga, tenga, Kapilikoni*"

("Welensky wants the land, Capricorn. Get out, get out, you can't stay here, and take your lice with you, Capricorn").

Sir Robert Armitage, Governor of Nyasaland in 1959, has, perhaps a little surprisingly, been credited in popular legend with a share in the origins of the Capricorn Society.

*"Mai wako Armitage,
Boma lace tinalanda.
Bambo wako Welensky.
Coka Kapilikoni usandinunkitse"*

("Your mother was Armitage, whose government we have taken from him; your father was Welensky. Away with you, Capricorn, lest you should cause me to stink").

It would be interesting but perhaps unprofitable to speculate on the extent to which ancient emotions are still aroused when these songs are sung. The present writer suspects that, the lesson having been taught and learnt, little remains but simple pleasure in familiar sounds, woken occasionally to patriotic fervour having no very great direct relationship with the words when the Prime Minister or some other prominent person is present. Then the songs become a sequence, almost a liturgy: hero-worship fined down to pure adoration, the land and its aspirations fixed in one avatar.

*"Yoh, yoh, yoh, yoh,
Anacimwanji Banda?"*

("How can Banda be wrong?").

At such gatherings the patriotic popular songs of Malawi can be heard to best advantage. One may imagine a dusty gravel road, winding over brief escarpments and alongside sharp volcanic hills, sweeping down through flat dry plains and skirting sudden thick patches of aboriginal forest — a road like that close to which this article is being written. A Central Region road on a plateau with, for good measure, a view of the lake. Hours before the Prime Minister is expected, the people begin to gather. It is known that he will stop and say a few words to them, and they take advantage of their wait to chaffer in the market, pester the postmaster to leaf through the piles of dead letters on the off-chance that their kin in South Africa might have sent them some money, exchange banter with the extra, unfamiliar policemen — always exceptionally affable on such occasions — and admire the spruce schoolchildren who will be, perhaps, singing the national anthem. There is no fuss and no anxiety: the whole day is given up to expectancy and reminiscence, the small diversions of peasants. At last a cloud of dust is seen in the distance, trailing along the foot of a long deep-green mountain: the cavalcade of cars has left the previous stopping-place, seven miles away. People begin to take up positions, a prominent coign being reserved for the man who will give out the songs. He is dressed in what is fast becoming the national costume for men: over his shirt and trousers, and fastened across one shoulder, he has draped a toga made of a purplish cloth on which are printed a portrait of Dr. Banda and a number of patriotic slogans. On his head is a brimless, peakless cap of the same material. Near him stand the local leaders, officials of the party and the government, some in similar dress, others in white shirts and dark

trousers, ties in the national colours, green, red and black, gleaming down their chests. As the cars drive up and halt there is a great surge forward, people crowding in until only a narrow passage is left along which the Prime Minister walks from the car in which he travels to the Land-Rover which has been converted into a kind of travelling pulpit. He mounts the steps and turns round, greeting the people on all sides. There is clapping and cheering, and the song-leader gives out the first song:

"Kamuzu ndi mkango ee —"

and the gathering joins in:

"Ndi mkango, ndi mkango ee ee, Ndi mkango"

("Kamuzu is a lion, he is a lion, a lion indeed").

The tune is strong, simple and attractive: *everybody sings, even the present writer, a lone white face on the edge of the crowd. After a time there is silence, and the Prime Minister starts to speak. As each point is made there is either clapping or, if it is relevant, a song which is both agreement and applause.

Solo: *"Kwaca lelo a Malawi"*.

Chorus: *"Kwaca lelo Kapilikoni, lelo kwaca,*

Tidzalamula atsamunda.

Zindikilani Kapilikoni, lelo kwaca"

("It is dawn today, people of Malawi. Capricorn, today it is dawn. We shall give the orders, we the workers in gardens. Recognize this, Capricorn, today it has dawned").

Kwaca, the dawn, a forbidden word in 1959, and by extension the cock, the herald of dawn, together form the new crest of the nation. They are symbols much used in the songs, particularly those which are purely exultant.

"Tambala akalila kokoliko,

Tambala akalila kokolikoliko kwaca.

A Malawi kwaca

Kunyadila kamuzu.

Kokoliko kwaca.

Freedom kwaca."

("When the cock cries cock-a-doodle, cock-a-doodle-doo, it is dawn. People of Malawi, it is a dawn to make the little root (kamuzu) burgeon. Cock-a-doodle-dawn, dawn of Freedom").

At some point in the speech, in between vilifications of the Capricorn Society and its supporters, there comes a mention of the arch-enemy incarnate and his wiles; and the soloist at once bursts forth:

"Kwaca kwaca a Malawi,

Citaganya takana".

and the crowd replies:

"Citaganya ndiyo nyambo ya Welensky,

Citaganya takana".

("It has dawned, people of Malawi; we have rejected Federation. Federation was Welensky's baited hook; we have refused to take it").

Eventually the speech, rarely a long one, is at an end, and the Prime Minister walks back to his car between the lines of people saluting him once more as a lion; and is driven off. For his audience this has been a visit not merely from a politician, a transient leader such as there might be in a more developed country, but a glamorous occasion, the passing among them of a symbol that transcends them but yet is not so remote as to be beyond their reach. He is ruler, prelate and film-star in one: he is what they would

* More intensive listening has not only confirmed my impression that the songs were on the whole not particularly distinguished musically, but substantiated that the tunes are not even indigenous in style. They are "the usual run of tonic and dominant"; in fact, hymn tunes lifted bodily from the psalters of churches locally strong, modified slightly in tempo and rhythm, and varied occasionally with "Ionian" or "Hypolydian" cadences which help to relieve their melodic banality. Their effect seems to depend very largely on the setting in which they are performed; sung in private and by one person only, they sound rather dreary. In the case of the song "Kwaca kwaca a Malawi" the tune of "John Brown's Body" is used in a totally unchanged form.

wish themselves and their children to be, the man who can move freely and with dignity everywhere. To them he is not someone set too far apart, on a pedestal: he is an apotheosis and projection of themselves, and they acclaim him not with slavish deference but with the joy and enthusiasm they feel in the epiphany of their own importance.

That perhaps is the reason for the genuine popularity of the songs which celebrate him, his associates and his slogans. They form an artistic *corpus* the relevance of which to themselves is immediately felt by those that sing and those that hear them. Popular songs on any other subject, just now, would have little meaning; they might have passing and local attractions, but they would not, as these do, sweep the country. Malawi is, after all, a very young country, one which is still finding it necessary to establish a general national identity. Five distinct languages and a multiplicity of tribal differences may cause the outside observer of this, as of many another new African state, to predict speedy dissolution; but sensible villagers are not likely to sacrifice their mobility and their extended markets and the opportunities for education of their children to local traditions many of which they themselves have recognized to be simply old-fashioned conveniences, devices to facilitate the more involuted life of an earlier age. Therefore they cling to the symbols of their new nationhood — their martyrs, their imprisonments, their enemies and the heraldic tokens of their self-expression — and to the songs which celebrate them, the only medium by which they can be retained constantly in the awareness of everybody and passed on to the next generation, the only form in which they can be preserved as both familiar and new.

One may speculate on what will happen to these songs in the future. Will they be forgotten, disinterred periodically as historical illustrations, or go on to become a lasting section of folk art? Analogies with other countries can give conflicting results. No British popular song, for instance, dating from that time, still celebrates the defeat of the Armada in 1588 or the *annus mirabilis* of 1759; but the insignificant treason of Guy Fawkes achieves yearly recognition from the mouths of children, and long after the tortuosities of seventeenth-century Irish politics have become the interest solely of specialists the B.B.C. continues to troll out, several times a day, the partisan strains of:

“Say, brudder Teague, did ye hear de decree,
Lilliburlero, bullen-a-la,
Dat we shall have a new depute?
Lilliburlero, bullen-a-la.
Lero, lero —.”