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CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN NORTHERN MALAWI c. 1350–1800

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ABSTRACT This article attempts to portray the political and religious culture of the peoples who inhabited northern Malawi in the pre-1800 period. It demonstrates how the Ngulube groups established polities in the area and how they came to dominate the indigenous peoples. It also shows how different circumstances in individual localities influenced the mode of dominance by the Ngulube groups over the various autochthones. The article further shows how the prosperity of the Tumbuka country under the Mkandawire was destroyed by the droughts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and how this left a vacuum which was filled in the eighteenth century by the *lowoka* traders.

This article discusses the history of the people of modern northern Malawi in the period c. 1350–1800. These peoples fall into three main language families, Tumbuka, Ngonde/Nyakyusa and Lambya/Nyiha/Sukwa. The Tumbuka were made up of a mixture of patrilineal and matrilineal clans but in the centuries after 1500 changed to patrilineal descent. On the other hand the other two groups have, as far as tradition can recall, always been patrilineal. This article concentrates on migration and settlement, stressing the interaction between various clans and ethnic groups. It also discusses the emergence of political, social and religious institutions and their bearing upon the economy of the region. It demonstrates how between c. 1600 and c. 1780 two main groups, the Ngulube and *Lowoka*, established polities in the area and how, ultimately, they came to dominate the autochthones. Furthermore, the article tries to place the history of the area within the wider context of the Lake Malawi-Tanganyika corridor.

Before the mid-fourteenth century two distinct indigenous peoples inhabited the area south of the Songwe River. The earliest people of which we have records probably arrived before c. 1285, and comprised the Mzembe and Chiluba of the mountainous Phoka region, the Mwene-kisindile, Mwenifumbo and Chilima of the Karonga and Chitipa plains (Kalinga, *man.*: 48–68; Msiska, 1978). Their traditions of origin claim that they came from the north-eastern side of Lake Malawi and it is possible that they are related to the *abilema* whom Monica Wilson (1958: 3) suggests lived in modern Unyakyusa before the arrival of the Lwembe lineage in Unyakyusa. The second or Nyiha-speaking group, the “Si”...Sikwese, Silumbu, Simwayi, Simwaka and Simbowe probably came from Unyiha/Usafwa in south-western Tanzania. With the exception of the Simbowe most of these clans settled in the hills either because the more agriculturally favourable plains were already occupied or because they were attracted by the iron ore of the uplands. The migration of the “Si” and the entry into the region of the Mwaphoka Mbale who claim interlacustrine origins may have occurred at the same time, that is, during the long dry period that may have afflicted East Africa from c. 1285 to 1335 (Msiska, 1978).

The Mwambale Mwaphoka settled in what came to be called the Phoka Highlands. They were good iron smelters and they established amicable relations with the indigenous families.

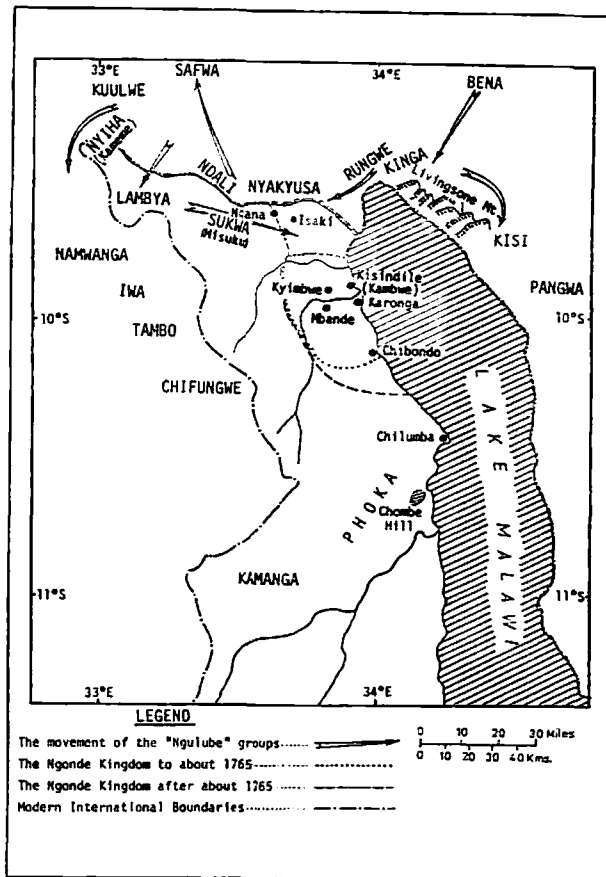


Fig. 1. Migration and settlement in Karonga, Chitipa and surrounding areas.

the Mzembe and Chiluba, on whom they came to depend for agricultural produce and some of the coal deposits which the Mbale needed for their furnaces. The Mzembe and Chiluba on the other hand began to depend on the Mbale for iron agricultural tools and weapons.

The iron technology of the Phoka improved with the arrival before c. 1400 of Kalonga immigrants of the Phiri clan who entered the country from the north-west and who are better known as the founders of the Maravi empire. The Kalonga taught the Phoka how to dig deeper mines and to construct bigger furnaces. The Kalonga were also responsible for the introduction of enlarged apertures for oxygen and for the use of more than one outlet for slag. The Phoka learned the use of slag as a catalyst and the advantages of using charcoal rather than coal. The new technology introduced by the Kalonga into the Phoka region tilted the balance of power between the indigenous Mzembe-Chiluba and the Mwaphoka Mbale in favour of the latter. This further affected the economic interdependence that had hitherto existed between the two groups. The Mbale spread their settlements into the lowlands formerly the exclusive domain of the Chiluba-Mzembe. No longer were they dependent upon the autochthones either for their supplies of coal or for their agricultural products, the latter being supplied by rela-

tions living in the lowlands. During a famine the Mbale physically overran the indigenous people for refusing to share their food supplies and the total political dominance of both highlands and lowlands by the Mwambale had been achieved (Msiska, 1978).

It is possible that the movements of the Mbale were part of the more widespread migration from the interlacustrine region of East Africa which moved southwards along the chain of lakes to Lake Malawi. The "Si" migration from Nyiha-Safwa may well have been set in motion by the arrival of these interlacustrine immigrants in the area south-east of Lake Tanganyika. A number of immigrants created politically dominant clans south of the Songwe River, the Sikwese and Simbowe on the Chitipa and Karonga plains respectively, the Silumbu and Simwayi in the Misuku hills, the Simwaka in the area between the Mafunga hills and the Nyika plateau and the Mwaphoka Mwambale initially in the Phoka highlands, later expanding into the lowlands (Kalinga, 1978: 57-60, 1979a). It seems that these were the people who formed the later Iron Age culture which has been dated to between 1090 ± 80 and 1450 ± 80 . It is suggested by archaeological evidence from various sites in this region that a new people had arrived by the beginning of the second millennium A.D. These new immigrants had an advanced material culture similar to that of some people in the remoter areas of northern Malawi today and far in advance of the early Iron Age culture. The Nyiha of south-western Tanzania and Phoka of the Nyika plateau are still familiar with the building methods of this culture, using wood, daga and grass. Their pots were also made in a way hitherto unknown in the area, and tended to be thin and gourd-shaped (Robinson, 1972: 57-60).

Between Phoka and Chewa areas in the north and south respectively, there lived various Tumbuka-speaking clans. The Nkamanga, Henga and Kasitu valleys were inhabited mainly by the Luhanga and various branches of the Mkandawire which then included the Kachali, Nyirongo, Mtika and Nyanjagha. Some of these lineages seem to have spread as far east as modern Nkhata-Bay district and as far west as the Luangwa valley in modern Lundazi district of eastern Zambia (Kalinga, 1976; Chipeta, 1982: 35-36). Recent research (Chipeta, 1982) suggests that though apparently physically divided into clan spheres of influence, Tumbuka country was in fact at this time under the hegemony of a dominant Mkandawire lineage which, like the Simbowes, had economic links with the Swahili-Arabs on the coast of East Africa. The Mkandawire were also active in local and regional trade and, according to Chipeta (1982: 78-79) they sought to control commerce in hoes, salt, ivory and precious skins in the central section of modern northern Malawi. The nature of the Mkandawire policy is not clear but traditions indicate that lineages predominated, with lineage ideology most important, and with chiefly lineages of relatively minor importance. Besides these notable pointers to political unity, Tumbuka country also enjoyed a certain degree of social cohesion through a religious belief in a high god. Chiuta or Leza, who was approached through an intermediary spirit called Chikang'ombe. This spirit was believed to have residencies in different parts of the Tumbuka-speaking area, a phenomenon which suggests that there existed a cultural or religious unity. The residencies, guarded by Mkandawire priests, included Chikang'ombe hill in Nkamanga from where Chikang'ombe visited Zambwe on Pelekezi mountain in eastern Zambia, Njakwa at the source of the Henga valley, and Mwanda hill on the borders of modern Malawi and Zambia. Chikang'ombe took the physical form of a snake, was thought to be a male force, and had several wives devoted to his service. He was similar to Thunga who was a python-like deity that was worshipped by the Northern Chewa (Vail, 1980). This evidence has led us to conclude that the early Tumbuka-speaking peoples were closer to the matrilineal Chewa in the south than to the patrilineal Phoka, Ngonde, Lambya and others to their north.

Thus, with the exception of the Karonga lakeshore. Phoka and Nkamanga areas where the Simbowe, Mbale, and Mkandawire maintained recognizable polities. political structure of the whole region was characterised by a two-tier hierarchy of localised chieftaincy at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This form of political organisation revolved around a local chieftain as the upper-most authority in a given area. The chief in this position ruled over a group of closely related lineage-based villages of which his own was considered the most senior genealogically. To the community of villages surrounding him, the chief rendered religious, judicial and military services, and was in return entitled to the allegiance of all his followers. The arrival of the Ngulube migrants from the area north-east of Lake Malawi, makes the dating of the region immediately south of the Songwe River more accurate since regnal lists and genealogies extend back to the arrival of these people into the area. The dating and chronological structure for these migrations is achieved by reconstructing the regnal lists of the Kyungus, Kameme and Mwaulambya, the present rulers of the Ngonde, Nyiha and Lambya. The three founders plus the Msukwa and Nyakyusa ruling lineages were contemporaries, the Kyungu and Kameme being brothers, the first Mwaulambya having already established his authority when the Kyungu crossed the Chitipa plain. The generation dates c. 1570–1600 from the regnal lists coincide with the dates proposed for a major and widespread drought of 1560–1625 period when the Zimba were ravaging the eastern coast of Africa and Mkanda's horders were devastating the Sukuma country (Itandala, 1979; Alpers, 1975: 49–52; Kalinga, man.: 94–96; Webster, 1980: 71–72). The immigration has been called the Ngulube movement because descendants of the migrants refer to their high god as Ngulube (Kalinga, man.: 79–85).

The Mwaulambya was at the head of the Ngulube migration. He crossed the Songwe river into what later became Ulambya and there he found the Sikwese and the Chilima clans. The Mwaulambya assumed political control of the area through more peaceful means than the Kyungu who was shortly to occupy the Karonga Plain. This can partly be attributed to the fact that the migration party of the Mwaulambya was smaller than that of the Kyungu. Consequently, the Mwaulambya was more accommodating than the Kyungu whose close advisers were chosen exclusively from those who had accompanied him for all, or part, of the migration. The major officials of the Mwaulambya on the other hand were drawn from the families found in the region, the latter sharing the prestige and political power with the new rulers. Similarly, the Msukwa, another leader within the Ngulube migration, assumed political power in the Misuku hills over the Simwayi and Silumbu clans without the use of excessive force. Both Ulambya and Misuku were founded on compromise (Kalinga, 1977; 1978: 60).

The means by which the immigrants founded chieftaincies and later governed the people, as well as their numerical strength, is reflected in the present language situation. CiLambya and the language spoken in Kameme are dialects of the indigenous Nyiha while Kyangonde and Kinyakyusa are dialects of the language of the Ngulube peoples' language. In other words, the Mwaulambya and Kameme and their followers were assimilated, at least linguistically, while in Ungonde and Unyakyusa the immigrants imposed their language. Modern CiSukwa is a dialect of Ndali (a linguistic group north of the Songwe) understood by the Nyiha speakers and relatively easier to learn by the Ngonde than Nyiha proper. CiSukwa forms a bridge between the Nyiha and Ngonde languages.

Meantime after a long westerly migration taking them to Unyiha, the Kyungu, Kameme and party passed through Ulambya and Misuku and then proceeded eastwards to the Karonga

plain. Within a short time of their arrival, Kameme returned and settled in the area immediately west of Ulambya. Here he established political authority over a people who were mainly of Nyika stock although in later years many Mambwe and Namwanga migrated into the Kameme chiefdom. It is not clear how he established the Kameme state. It was a smaller polity than that of his brother, the Kyungu who founded his kingdom on an already established state ruled by the Simbowe (Kalinga, 1979a).

The Simbowe family came from Unyiha in modern Tanzania and settled at Mbande in the middle section of the Karonga lakeshore plain. The name Simbowe refers not only to the clan but also to a title probably used by a long list of rulers (Kalinga, 1979b: 21–29). The basis of Simbowe's power is not clear but it would appear that he was a trader involved in a commercial network which probably extended to the East Coast. Archaeological excavations carried out by Robinson at Mbande and the surrounding area have yielded artifacts which included glass beads, porcelain and conus shells. Indeed, Robinson himself concluded that the artifacts dated to the period between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries probably belonging to the pre-Portuguese period on the East Coast, that is, during the height of Arab power and commercial influence (Robinson, 1966: 187; 1972: 169–188). Citing Tumbuka evidence, Chipeta (1982: 78–80) refers to 1400–1580 as the first age of prosperity dominated by trader chiefs, the Simbowe on the Karonga plain and the Mkandawire in Nkamanga valley and, as pointed out earlier, he also has traditions which note Swahili-Arab interests in the region during this period.

Traditions suggest that relations between Simbowe and the autochthones were uneasy especially when the droughts of the 1560s and 1580s undermined trade and signalled the onset of serious economic decline. When the Kyungu and his followers arrived they formed an anti-Simbowe alliance with the Mwenekisindile who were custodians of an important nature spirit shrine controlling a snake cult. In fact it would appear that the Mwenekisindile assisted the Kyungu in planning and executing the assault upon the Simbowe (Kalinga, *man.*: 65–66). The Kyungu assumed power at Mbande by force and gradually was able to establish a new order. Once settled, the Kyungu maintained their supremacy over their new subjects by establishing a ritual centre devoted to the cult of the royal ancestors. The Kyungu did not attend the ritual centre, but gave his blessings to Mulwa, a senior official who had accompanied him to the area and who became the head of the ritual centre. In addition adults in the kingdom attended an annual ceremony in which all fires were extinguished and new ones lit from the central fire at the royal court, a ceremony during which the people renewed allegiance to the Kyungu. On a more frequent basis the people were expected to pay tribute to the Kyungu and work in the royal gardens. The Kyungu and his officials further established themselves in the area by marrying into the original local families (Ngo, H. T.: 1, 14, 24).

Before the arrival of the Kyungu family the people had worshipped the high god through nature spirits, especially the medium of the divine snake. The Kyungus employed the royal ancestors as mediums for the worship of their own high god, Ngulube, thus introducing and promoting royal ancestor worship. As the people slowly accepted the growth of ancestral worship they also accepted the divinity of the Kyungu. He became priest-king and communicator with the royal ancestors. To the Ngonde the Kyungu became the living representative of god. His health determined their welfare and prosperity and to safeguard these he was restricted to his residence. Should the Kyungu show even minor signs of illness he was immediately smothered by his councillors, the makambala. As ancestral worship gained popularity in the area

the snake cult and with it the Kisindile clan became much less influential (Ngo. H. T.: 1, 14, 24).

These developments occurred during the reigns of the first four Kyungus, roughly between 1600 and 1720. Soon after the death of the third Kyungu. Mwakalosi, his son and successor renounced the throne because he feared that should he fall ill, the *makambala* would ritually kill him. He also was unwilling to have all but one of his children killed. The two practices were designed to avoid competition for the throne. The *makambala* were also protecting their own position by ensuring that a ruler was of their own choice. The crisis caused by the refusal of Mwakalosi to accede to the throne was averted when the *makambala* installed his brother Magemo as Kyungu (Kalinga, man.: 107; Ngo. H. T.: 1, 14).

The Kameme, Mwaulambya and Msukwa chiefdoms also promoted royal ancestral worship. However, they became more Nyiha in their philosophy as in their language, and smothering of the monarch, restrictions on his movements and killing of royal children never featured in their history. However, all the Ngulube chiefdoms represented the introduction into the area of a new form of political organisation which brought together religion and politics under more elevated and prestigious leaders and where relations among the citizenry were based more upon political than upon kinship ties.

An even greater crisis occurred in the Ngonde kingdom upon the death of Kyungu Magemo whose only successor, Mwangonde, was too young to succeed him. His sister's son, Kasyombe became Kyungu. Kasyombe's father, a Ndali, was the ruler of a small chieflet in the north-western corner of the Karonga plain. With Kasyombe's accession to power in about 1750, therefore, this new region was incorporated into an enlarged Ngonde kingdom. Another important change resulting from the accession of Kasyombe was that the *makambala* began to lose some of their powers to the Kyungu. Kasyombe had been brought up in Ngana and he found it difficult to abide by the restrictions imposed upon him by the *makambala*. He insisted on personally touring the kingdom and ended the practice of killing the royal male children. The number of princes proliferated leading in turn to a further increase in the powers of the monarch especially after some of his successors such as Mwangonde (c. 1796–1835) assigned portions of land to princes thereby ensuring that the Kyungus' influence was felt throughout the domain. There can be no doubt, however, that by 1800, the Ngonde kingdom was confident enough to begin asserting itself in the international politics of the wider region south of the Songwe (Kalinga, 1982).

Thus, over a period of five hundred years from the arrival of the immigrants in the mid-thirteenth century, the area south of the Songwe had undergone several stages in its development. The early snake cult with its religious shrines gradually gave way to the authority of stronger, dominant clans with the eventual formation of states in the region: Mwaphoka Mbale, the Mkandawire, Ulambya, Kameme, Misuku and Ungonde in the north, Kanyenda, Kabunduli and Chulu in the south. In the north Kyangonde had been introduced as a new language by the Ngonde and Nyakyusa founders while in the south Citonga was evolving out of a fusion of the Tumbuka and Chewa peoples and languages. The central area of the region was dominated by Tumbuka, the original clans, the Luhanga and various branches of the Mkandawire being joined by other lineages mainly from the west, north and east of the region.

So contrary to what has been argued before (Kalinga: 1979d; Vail, 1972) Tumbuka country

was linked to a trading network which stretched from the Luangwa in the west to Kilwa on the East African coast long before the eighteenth century. When the various families usually referred to as the *lowoka*—those who crossed the lake—arrived in the area during the eighteenth century and established political and economic authority in the region, they were continuing a tradition started by the Mkandawire centuries before. The major difference between them was that when the *lowoka* arrived the prosperity which the Tumbuka country had once experienced under the Mkandawire (c. 1490–c. 1580) had long gone. The droughts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (Chipeta, 1982: 106–108) brought hardship to the area and ultimately contributed to the collapse of the Mkandawire influence. In many ways therefore, the *lowoka* were starting afresh.

The most famous of these “new men” (the *lowoka*) was Kakalala Musawila Gondwe, probably a Yao-influenced Nyanwezi who for some time had been involved in the trade to the East Coast. Searching for ivory, Gondwe crossed the lake at Chilumba and settled in the Nkamanga plain near the Luangwa valley which at that time was heavily populated with elephants. He established contact with the head of the Luhanga clan Chilundafwa Luhanga, who was pleased with the goods—beads, *mphande* shells and cloth—which the newcomer had brought. Later Gondwe married into the Luhanga and other influential families thereby firmly establishing himself in Tumbuka society. To fully tap the resources of the region, he gave turbans—the type which he himself wore—to various local leaders as a symbol of authority derived from himself (Vail, 1972: 151–159; Kalinga, 1979c).

Other immigrant families from east of the lake established themselves in the area adjacent to Nkamanga. In the district that is today known as Hewe, Katumbi Mulindafwa Chabinga had begun to organize a smaller yet more viable state than that of Gondwe. He too came from Nyamewezi territory and also crossed the lake at Chilumba, but unlike Gondwe, he went into the mountain area which adjoins the Misuku hills and the Nyiha plateau and settled at Chigoma in Nthali. Again like Gondwe he distributed turbans to local leaders as a symbol of his recognition of their authority. From Chigoma, Katumbi extended his trading contacts westwards towards Marambo in the ivory-rich Luangwa valley. Later his descendents moved some miles south-westwards to modern Hewe where the centre of the state was located when the Europeans arrived (Kalinga, 1979c).

Another trader, Katong’ongo Mhinga, who came from the Ubena-Uhehe region arrived in the area soon after Gondwe and Katumbi had settled there. He found suitable land in the Henga valley where he and his family could settle. Katong’ongo was not only a trader but a man of many skills: he was a hunter, an artisan specialising in ornamental bracelets and, most important of all, he could produce salt which soon gave him control of the high quality salt pans at Kamembe. Katong’ongo also married into local families which such as the Munthali, Mzumara and Mkandawire were well established in the Henga valley. He gradually became influential and came to be known as Mwahenga, owner of the Henga area. He traded with Mwaphoka Mbale’s people and with Gondwe’s Nkamanga (Kalinga, 1979c).

Although the three immigrant families, Musawila Gondwe, Katumbi Mulindafwa Chabinga and Katong’ongo Mhinga, began to dominate the trade of most of the area south of the Songwe and east to the Luangwa valley, it was difficult for them to carry on for long without clashing with each other. Gondwe felt particularly threatened because Katumbi controlled access to the region that was rich in ivory; furthermore, it was important for him to have free use

of, if not control of the Chilumba ferry in order to transport his ivory to the East Coast. To achieve the former, he became involved in the succession crisis following the death of Katumbi. He succeeded in promoting a weak candidate for the chieftaincy. He then worked out an arrangement with Mwachenga whereby the latter agreed not to impede his trade and was given cloth and other valuable goods in return. Gondwe made similar arrangements with the rulers east of the Henga valley. These included Mwafulirwa, Mwamlomwe, Mwankhunikila and Kachulu. Thus by 1800 Gondwe was able to claim a trade monopoly of the area between the Luangwa and the western shores of Lake Malawi. In the Nkamanga plain he had achieved political authority and with this he was able to extend his trading empire in which he was assisted by the fact that families—mainly the Msiska and Nyirenda—probably also from Unyamwezi and also traders, took over political control of the area ruled by the Mwaphoka, ending a long period of their supremacy in the area. The Phoka country which lay between Nkamanga and the Henga valley on the one hand and the Chilumba ferry on the other hand had long been the nexus of local trading (Msiska, 1978).

In the eighteenth century some smaller polities were founded by families from the eastern side of the lake, many being, like Gondwe and Katumbi, ivory traders. To the immediate south of Ungonde the Fulirwa state was founded by the Mwafulirwa family in the area previously dominated by the Mkandawire clan. Mwandamunjira Kaira, a relative of the Mwafulirwa, later left Fulirwa and travelled westwards and settled at Zibang'ombe after overcoming the indigenous Nyiha-speaking Simwaka. This marked the birth of the Wenya state which by the end of the eighteenth century had extended northward to the southern borders of U-lambya. At about the same time the area south-west of Wenya fell under the rule of a *lowoka* family, the Mughogho. This area, Uyombe, which today forms part of the Isoka district of Zambia, was rich in elephants and in later decades became popular with many hunters (Kaira, 1971; Kalinga, 1979c).

Some families had crossed the lake further south and settled not far from the present Nkata Bay boma. Amongst them were the forebears of modern Mankhambira. They were hunters and left their homes some time in the 1720's probably because they were attracted by the possibility of finding abundant ivory along the western shores of Lake Malawi. They displaced the Phiri rulers and after a generation became the dominant family in the area. In the eighteenth century the Tumbuka area was dominated first by ivory hunters, then traders whose control of wealth led to the assumption of political authority. The hunters and traders had chosen the area because successful trade normally required political influence of some kind. Such political influence was not possible in the northern states which remained outside the network of long distance trade for almost a century after the Tumbuka had been drawn into it. In the eighteenth century the Maravi empire was disintegrating and the states of the Tumbuka-Chewa marginal zone in the south were being left in total control of their own affairs. However even within chiefdoms such as Kanyenda, the fissiparous tendencies which frequently accompanied the ivory trade were beginning to make themselves felt, the same forces which led to the fragmentation of the Phoka kingdom and of the Maravi local authority along the lake which Mankhambira exploited to create his own hegemony (Mkandawire, 1979; Nkhoma, 1978; Kwaule, 1979). After 1800 all states and peoples would become deeply involved in the commercial age of ivory and later slaves with unsettling to disastrous results.

This article has shown that in the pre-1500 period the majority of the peoples of northern Malawi were not acephalous and that there existed in the region polities of various size and

nature. The latter included the Simbowe, Mbale and Mkandawire in the Karonga lakeshore, Phoka highlands and Henga and Nkamanga valleys. By the end of the sixteenth century the political configuration of the area had changed in that the Ngulube immigrants had established the Lambya, Sukwa, Kameme and Ngonde chiefdoms; in the Mkandawire hegemony had come to an end. The depression of the seventeenth century which the Tumbuka country witnessed was followed in the eighteenth century by a flurry of political changes and commercial activities dominated by the *lowoka* from across the lake in present-day Tanzania. The older Ngulube polities along the southern banks of the Songwe river did not get seriously involved in the commerce introduced by the newcomers until the nineteenth century.

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NOTES

The field notes have been arranged according to the areas in which they were collected. Thus those from Ungonde and Fulirwa will be referred to as Ngonde Historical Texts (Ngo. H.T.) and Fulirwa (Fu. H.T.) respectively.

Sections of this article will appear in a more general discussion to be included in Vol. IV of the *Unesco History of Africa*.

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