

# Hearing voices from the Chilembwe Rising

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In 1915, the Reverend John Chilembwe led a short-lived but violent uprising in the British Protectorate of Nyasaland – what is now Malawi – which sent shock waves through Britain’s possessions in south-east Africa. One hundred years later, the British Academy has published the evidence presented at the Inquiry that the British authorities held in the aftermath of ‘the Chilembwe Rising’.

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The editor of the volume, Dr John McCracken, here explains the importance of these witness statements – not just for helping us understand the events of 1915, but as a unique record of African voices from the early 20th century.

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Anyone who studies Malawian history has to make sense of the ‘Chilembwe Rising’. The Malawian government today wishes to make sense of it in rather simplistic terms, as a rising led by the first proto-nationalist. Indeed, a portrait of John Chilembwe appears on the banknotes that are used in Malawi.

But I find Chilembwe a much more complex character, and the Rising itself much more interesting. And it does provide an insight into the whole character of colonialism in Africa.

## The Rising

The leader of the Providence Industrial Mission, the Reverend John Chilembwe (Figure 1), had been educated in the United States from 1897, and had come back to Malawi in 1900. He had established a series of schools and outstations, operating within the colonial system. Then in 1915, for reasons that are still debated, he led a small-scale, violent attack on aspects of that colonial society.

The most dramatic, on Saturday 23 January, was the attack on the headquarters of the huge, 163,000-acre Magomero estate (Figure 2), run by Alexander Livingstone Bruce, who was the grandson of David Livingstone. The attack centred on the estate manager, William Jervis Livingstone (Figure 4), who may have been a remote relation of David Livingstone. His head



**Figure 1**  
John Chilembwe, his wife Ida and daughter Emma, photographed by Mungo Murray Chisuse.

was cut off and was brought back to the church, where John Chilembwe preached a sermon on the Sunday with the head beside him on a pole. There were attacks on the subsidiary station, and three Europeans were killed. And then there were attacks on the African Lakes Corporation headquarters, Mandala, at Blantyre, to try and get guns and ammunition. Subsequently there were smaller attacks in Zomba, the colonial capital, and in Ncheu further north, and at Mlanje, but none of those three really took off.

The whole thing was over in a matter of days. Very few people were killed on the colonial side. Subsequently some 30 people were executed, and many more were imprisoned for lengthy periods (Figure 3).



Figure 2  
Carrying cotton to store on the Magomero estate, 1908. Courtesy of the Zimbabwe National Archives.

### Reaction

The Rising did create an extraordinary *frisson* in colonial society – the fear that this was a challenge of a sort that they had not previously contemplated and now had to face up to. It is true that some individuals – such as Alexander Hetherwick, the leader of the Blantyre Mission – were very dismissive, regarding it as a small-

scale affair whose significance was grossly exaggerated by the colonial authorities. But the Governor, Sir George Smith, saw this as an event that created a new era in the history of Nyasaland. It meant that they would have to develop a police force in a much more effective way. And it meant that they would have to take a series of measures to meet what were seen as real concerns among African people.



Figure 3  
Supporters of John Chilembwe being led into captivity. Courtesy of Malawi National Archives.

We must remember that this was 1915, the middle of the First World War. In many ways the British were more concerned about German East Africa and the war that was taking place there. Chilembwe had taken advantage of the war, as the soldiers were up in the north and there were fewer around in the Shire Highlands. He certainly had tried to make contact with the German authorities, and imagined that he might get some sort of support there.

It is interesting that the following year, 1916, was the year of the Easter Rising, which has its similarities with the Chilembwe Rising. There were those at the time who made comparisons between the two.

## Inquiry

The Rising was in January 1915. The Inquiry was held in June and July 1915. There were 62 witnesses who were examined. And the key thing is that there was a stenographer present, so what you get is a verbatim account of the questions asked and the answers given – assuming the stenographer was accurate.

The greater number of witnesses were Europeans – missionaries, government officials and settlers. But 19 were Africans. Some of those were relatively elite Africans – ministers in the Church of Scotland, interpreters for the government, some chiefs, and people who worked on the Magomero estate.

When I entitled the volume *Voices from the Chilembwe Rising*, I was not being entirely accurate. We aren't hearing those who actually took part in the Rising, because those people were dead or in prison, or had fled into Mozambique. Rather they are the voices of people who were close to Chilembwe and the events. But they are *their* voices. It is quite rare in this period to have a record of voices from southern central Africa speaking directly in the way that they do. The Inquiry also received a number of written statements, and some of these are about Chilembwe and who he was. These are the earliest attempts by Malawians to try and make sense of Chilembwe, so this gives the evidence a special quality

As a historian, you have got to be aware of the limitations of this material. For example, there was the whole nature of the Inquiry. The high court judge who was chairing the Commission was a man who had sentenced to death a number of people in the same courtroom a few weeks before. Were the witnesses going to be truthful in what they said in front of him? In fact, the African witnesses seem incredibly frank in their replies. When they were asked about African grievances, they really went to town – they weren't being diplomatic. They had been told beforehand that they were not going to be arrested or punished for what they said, and they took this at face value.

There is also the issue of whether the Commission sometimes avoided asking difficult questions. One incident that was embarrassing for the colonial government related to the Assistant Resident at Chiradzulu, really close to where Chilembwe had his headquarters. He was told by his staff that there were armed men wandering around on the night of Friday



**Figure 4**  
William Jervis Livingstone in his uniform as a member of the Nyasaland Volunteer Reserve, 1914. He was killed in the attack on Magomero, and his head was cut off. Courtesy of David Stuart Mogg.

22 January; and the next day he disappeared off to Blantyre and was not seen for a couple of days. There was certainly a sense amongst the Europeans of 'Why did he go? What was this man doing?' However, the Commissioners didn't really follow that up. I suspect this was an awkward matter better talked about in private.

But issues of this sort add to the value and interest of these documents. We are not dealing with unproblematic sources, and we need to interpret and think about them.

## Testimony

There are a number of ways in which the testimony reproduced in this book is important. One aspect which comes through very strongly is the extent of the use of violence, of *chikoti* – whipping and flogging – which was seen as almost a matter-of-fact part of the behaviour of getting workers to work on plantations and estates.

Linked to this is the ambiguous position of the *capitaos* or foremen. You might imagine that such people would be particularly loyal to the estate owner, given that they were being paid more money and had more privileges. But if you look in detail at the Rising, many of the people who led the various quasi-military expeditions were



Joseph Bismarck and family at Domasi, c.1887. Courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

**Extract from the evidence given to the Inquiry by Joseph Bismarck, 14 July 1915**

Joseph Bismarck was one of the pioneer African land-owners and traders in the Blantyre area. Born c.1859 in the Quelimane district of Mozambique, he obtained his name as a boy from French merchants who believed he looked like the German Chancellor. He came to the Malawi region in 1876, joined the Blantyre Mission in 1878, and quickly made himself invaluable as an interpreter who spoke both English and Chinyanja. By the early years of the 20th century he had an estate of 150 acres at Namwili on which he grew bananas, ground-nuts and potatoes for the Blantyre market, as well as having a good herd of cattle. He remained closely associated with the Blantyre mission, maintained a school at his own expense at Soche and, in 1903, was elected representative elder to the Blantyre Presbytery. He was also closely associated with John Chilembwe as a fellow member of the Natives Industrial Mission, founded in 1909.

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**[Chairman of the Inquiry]: Now about taking off the hat to Europeans. What is the grievance about that?**

I myself have grievance about that.

**You are very polite in taking off your hat.**

However polite one may be, one has to suffer at the same time.

**What is your grievance?**

The natives, especially the educated natives always have a grievance about the hat. They say that in the old days they did not know what hats were, and they had no clothes. But now they are glad the European has come into the country and offered them to us for sale. And now they buy them and wear them. And when they go out with these on, they find war outside and inside as well.

**How inside?**

If you pass along a street with a hat on, if you don't be polite you will suffer for it. I can say as to that myself. I have been three times, myself, assaulted. So the natives say that when they go outside, say from here to Limbe with hats on "Now I am educated and am a free man". When he meets a European on the way whom he does not know and when he gets about 10 yards from the European, he says "Good morning, Bwana", he takes off his hat and nothing is said to him. If he doesn't take off his hat, it is said to him "Take off your hat." And if he refuses to take off his hat, he is told "I will give you chigoti [whip]". And therefore, for fear, he has to take off his hat and carry it under his arm; and educated natives say that that is not liberty, and that we are just treated as slaves. [Bismarck gave an account of two episodes he had personally experienced, and then continued] The third is with Mr Conforzi, on the way to Mbami.

**How many years ago is this?**

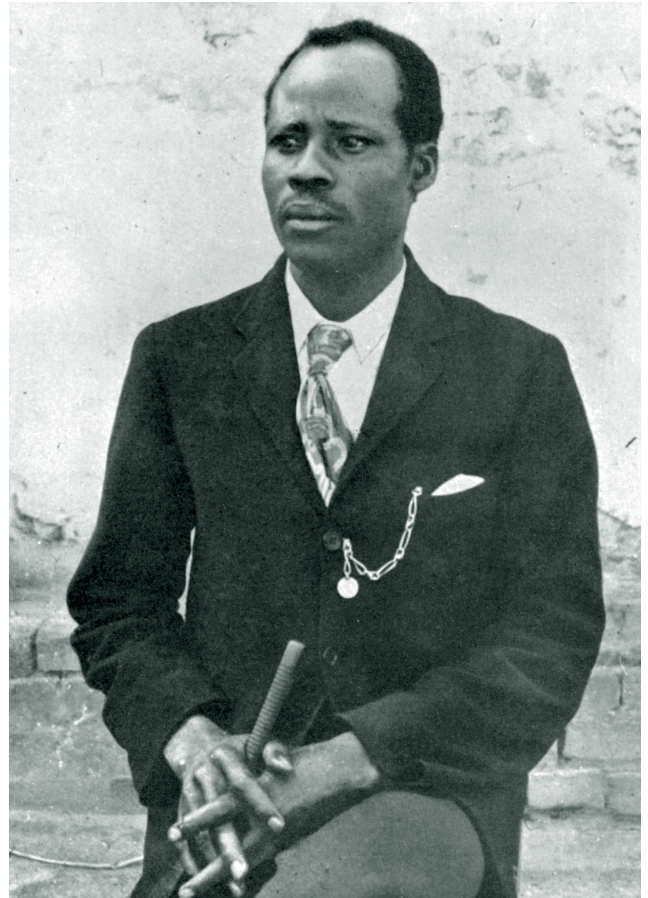
About two years ago. This gentleman was in his machila [portable hammock]. My friends, who were in front, passed on, and I saw him coming, and when he was close to me, I took off my hat. And he said "Take off your hat, you nyani [baboon]". And I said "I am not a nyani. I am a living being like yourself". He said "I will shoot you". And he pulled out his revolver. And I said "Shoot me". And I said "Why?" And he said "You are a blackman and I am a whiteman, and you must take off your hat".

Now, it is the same with all natives. And I want to ask you please if hats are evil things for natives to wear, why do companies bring out these materials and say they are for sale? If they are for sale – do they say that when we buy it we are to take it and put it in our house? We know how to pay respect. And it was a well known thing when the Europeans came into the country. The first courtesy is to a chief. But a stranger cannot say "Take off your hat." But if I meet a gentleman whom I don't know – is he to give me a stick on my head. Sometimes I used to throw my hat off, because I thought it was a burden to me. The natives thought that the matter of hats was meant to be civilization. They didn't know that if they were to use it, it was to be a danger to them. So we have brought this grievance to you.

themselves present or former *capitaos* who had worked on the Magomero estates. They did so because they were at the sharp end of the process. They themselves were subjected to floggings and indignities of that sort. But also they had attempted to have a school and a church built on the Magomero land, and these were destroyed: Bruce refused to allow churches or schools to exist on his estates, because he thought that they were just a trouble. So you can pull together very interesting information on the *capitaos* and the way in which they became disillusioned with the system.

There is also interesting testimony about what you could call ‘the matter of a hat’. For a number of the elite Malawians who gave evidence, the issue that they took up most strongly in respect of how they were ill-treated, was how settlers regarded their clothes, and particularly the issue of wearing a hat. They felt that, if you wore a hat and you went to Blantyre, you would ‘find war’. The white Europeans who met you would say, ‘Take off your hat!’ And if you did not take off your hat, they would strike you. And this felt like slavery – yet the Europeans claimed they were getting rid of slavery. The language of Joseph Bismarck says this most clearly (see extract on facing page), but there are several others who come back and harp on the hat question. Of course, the colonial officials were all bemused by this. What on earth were they talking about? Indeed, the great majority of Malawians were not obsessed by the hat question – it was only a limited number. But if you want to explain why several members of that limited number followed Chilembwe – Duncan Njilima, John Gray Kufa (Figure 5) – people who were well educated, owned their own small estates, and had done well out of the system – then I think it was because of this attack on their honour.

So that is one of the features that comes through. I would say, however, more generally, that this is a book in which I hope readers can find more: about Chilembwe – because there are a number of individuals who met Chilembwe and told in verbatim language about their encounters and the things that he said, and his attempts to get black Church of Scotland ministers to become members of his own church, and so on; about the details of the Rising; but more than that, about the whole nature of colonial society at that time.



**Figure 5**  
John Gray Kufa photographed c.1910 by Mungo Murray Chisuse. An outstanding product of the Blantyre Mission and subsequently an independent landowner, Kufa became one of Chilembwe’s closest associates. He was executed following the Rising.

This article is an edited version of remarks made by Dr John McCracken in conversation with Dr Michael Brett, the General Editor of the British Academy’s *Fontes Historiae Africanae (Sources of African History)*, New Series.



A longer version of the interview can be heard via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/chilembwe-rising/](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/chilembwe-rising/)

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