

# **Ecological Change, Agricultural Development and Food Production in Malawi: a Historiographical Review**

**Bryson G. Nkhoma**  
**Department of History and Heritage Studies,**  
**Mzuzu University, Malawi**

## **Abstract**

Given its economic significance, agriculture has been at the centre of historical scholarship in Malawi. Yet despite the significant contribution this scholarship has made to the country's development, there has been no effort to systematically reconstruct Malawi's agricultural historiography. This article, therefore, takes stock of the progress that has been made by historians on research in the country's agricultural history since the mid-1950s. The ultimate goal is to establish not only what might be regarded as the country's agricultural historiography, but also the place of food production, which has become an important food security aspect of most Malawian peasants. After assessing the earlier works, the study observes that Malawi has an agricultural historiography which, prompted by the political and economic thoughts of the time, has conceptually evolved after the traditions of modernisation, underdevelopment and social history schools. It is argued here that, despite raising a strong case about the processes by which colonialism and capitalism disrupted peasant food economies, the historiography has made little effort to explore the patterns of peasant food production that emerged through this process, except for those studies that sought to understand the growth of famine and hunger. While resonating in many respects with the agricultural historiography of southern Africa, the Malawi case has gone beyond to include smallholder irrigation farming, which despite being globally recognised as a panacea for maintaining food production in the changing climate, has been under researched even in the dominating regional climate historiography.

## **1. Introduction**

As most countries in southern Africa, Malawi, and a country located to the SouthEast of the region, pursues an economy that is predominantly agro-based (Thomas 1975:35-51; Kydd and Christiansen 1982:355-375). Comprising of estates and small holder farming, agriculture accounts for 35% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 85% of its labour force, and 90% of its foreign exchange (UNDP 2008). The estate sector largely produces cash crops, while the country obtains most of its foodstuffs from smallholder agriculture (Mhone 1987:30-51; Vail 1983: 39-86). Since the early 1890s, the state, in its various forms, made agricultural interventions to improve the levels of the peasants' food production in the face of various ecological, economic and political challenges (Liebenow, 1987). The interventions included market regulation, the

introduction of new crops and conservation agricultural methods, provision of agricultural inputs and the development of smallholder irrigation schemes. Although 85% of agricultural activities are carried out by smallholder farmers, agricultural policies have been framed in favour of the estates in terms of land allocation, crop marketing and extension services (Kydd 1985; Livingstone 1985; Pryor and Chipeta 1990; Peters and Kambewa 2007). Yet, the country depends on the smallholder farmers for the production of maize, which is its main food crop.

Given this economic significance, agriculture has been a subject of relatively greater historical scholarship in Malawi. Since the mid-1950s, scholars have attempted to reconstruct the historical patterns of agricultural and agrarian changes, the emergence of the African peasantry and the country's food production challenges. Yet despite the contribution this scholarship has made to the country's development, there has been minimal effort to systematically reconstruct Malawi's agricultural historiography. While Erik Green attempted to review the modern agricultural history of the country, he only limited his review to understanding how state policy-choices increased the levels of rural poverty in colonial and post-colonial Malawi (Green 2007). The absence of agricultural historiography in Malawi is surprising considering the tremendous progress historians from the region and beyond have made in this regard (Arrighi 1970: 197-234; Phimister 1979:253-268; Richards 1983: 1-72; Berry 1984:29-112; Isaacman 1993:1-120). As noted by Spear, an agricultural historiography would enhance originality, reduce duplication of efforts and provide scholarly context for future research in the country (Spear 2019).

This article, therefore, takes stock of the progress that has been made by historians on research in the country's agricultural history since the mid-1950s. The ultimate goal is to establish not only what might be regarded as the country's agricultural historiography, but also the place of food production, which has become an important food security aspect of most Malawian peasants. The study traces the origins of these studies, the methods employed as well as the theoretical debates and narratives that sustained them. After assessing the earlier works, the study observes that Malawi has an agricultural historiography which, prompted by the political and economic thoughts of the time, has conceptually evolved after the traditions of modernisation, underdevelopment and social history schools. There has been a growth of literature approximate to a colonial historiography that attempted to demonstrate the so called "benevolence" of colonial science and capitalism in transforming what it viewed as "backward" indigenous agricultural practices in rural Malawi. This scholarship was characteristic of the studies prior to the 1970s. From the 1970s onward, there appeared another scholarly evolution, which as counter-narratives to the preceding colonial historiography, underlined the disruptive nature of colonial science and capitalist developments on African rural life and economies. However, this scholarship has since the 1980s been challenged again by a group of scholars who, subscribing to the emerging new social history approach of the time, drew attention to the dynamics of local agency in the agricultural and agrarian changes associated with colonial and capitalist encounter by emphasizing on African adaptation, resilience and resistance. The latter contributed greatly to the narratives on the emergency of African peasantry, food security and irrigation farming.

Despite the growing scholarly popularity, the essay contends that the Malawi agricultural

historiography has given peripheral treatment to the subject of food production. Mostly, the historiography has embedded the subject into the analysis of such grand topics as agriculture, peasantry, ecological and climate change. Those that fore-fronted food in their studies, only analysed it from the perspective of African food crisis and famine. While resonating in many respects with the agricultural historiography of southern Africa, the Malawi case has, however, gone beyond to include smallholder irrigation farming, which despite being globally recognised as a panacea for maintaining food production in the changing climate, has been under researched even in the dominating regional climate historiography.

## **2. Agriculture, ecology and food security in colonial historiography**

Although Malawi became a British colony in 1891, the country's agricultural history began to attract systematic scholarship from the mid-1950s. Prior to those agricultural issues were examined by colonial officials who, as anthropologists by training, developed interest in documenting the everyday life of Malawians with whom they interacted (Buchanan 1885; Johnston 1897; Murray 1922). The earliest works in the Malawian historiography are those of Richard Kettlewell and John Pike, who despite being senior colonial government officials and amateurs in the field pioneered the studies of the history of the country's agriculture, economy and ecological changes (Kettlewell 1955; Kettlewell 1965; Pike 1968). Using archival sources, government documents and newspapers at their disposal, and more importantly their professional experiences, the works of these scholars provide a generic view of the problems affecting agricultural production, the evolution of colonial agricultural policies, and the overall contribution agriculture made to the country's development. <sup>1</sup>As pioneering studies, the scholarship made available the critical issues requiring attention in any analysis of the country's agricultural change and peasant production as well as the requisite policies that guided state intervention into peasant economy in the late colonial period. Coming from people with intimate colonial ideological backgrounds and obligations, the scholarship highlights the so-called backwardness of Africans in matters of culture, agriculture and ecology. It portrays the colonialists as agents of modernity and civilisation who struggled to bring peasants into what they thought were superior and modern ways of agriculture. Furthermore, the studies tended to be descriptive and deficient of the analytical vigour that is essential for the historical scholarship of this nature. Most importantly, these studies are not recognisance of the historical indigenous agrarian initiatives in cash and food crop production.

## **3. The growth of underdevelopment school, 1960 - 1980**

The period beginning from the late 1960s has gone down in history as the turning point of Malawian historiography of agriculture and the peasantry in particular and African history in general. Key to this development was the opening of the University of Malawi, and particularly the establishment of the History Department at Chancellor College, the

constituent college of the university. As professionals, the members of the Department, who at this embryonic stage consisted largely of professors from the west, embarked on a reconstruction of the history of the country paying attention to historical methodologies. Influenced by the nationalist historiography as well as the dependency and underdevelopment school of the time, Brigdal Pachai, Martin Chanock, Colin Baker, Leroy Vail and Kings Phiri set out to deconstruct the colonial historiography of Richard Kettlewell and John Pike. They sharply criticised not only the unscientific nature of the research methodologies they employed but also the modernization thesis which lied at the centre of their analysis of the impact of colonialism and capitalism on rural economies (Baker 1974: 7-26; Chanock 1972: 113-129; 1977: 396-409; Krishnamurthy 1972: 385-386; Pachai 1973: 681-698; 1974: 1-22; 1978; Phiri 1976: 1-22; Vail 1977; 1982: 39-88). Other than modernising rural economies, the scholarship demonstrates in detail, how the colonial state applied policies on land, taxation and labour to disrupt the pre-existing rural economies in the country. The colonial state craftily and coercively appropriated land and labour resources. This increased African vulnerability to unprecedented drought related famines and natural disasters. In a bid to establish a viable capitalist economy, colonialism paid no respect to food production, but instead worked towards forcing Africans to supply cheap labour to settler farmers in the country and abroad. From 1906, the colonial state forced Africans to participate in the production of cotton and tobacco at the expense of food production. The scholarship argues that it would be simplistic to celebrate colonialism and capitalism as agents of modernization in the face of glaring existing evidence of the failure of settler agriculture, which came to a climax during the economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s. It also draws attention to the extent to which the inheritance of colonial economic structures such as road and rail networks, estate agriculture and labour migration foredoomed the success of agricultural developments of the post-colonial period.

The strengths of these narratives lie in the fact that they provide a provocative and strategic entry into the study of food production and food security. Firstly, they stimulate scholarly interest into understanding the nature of the pre-existing African food production practices, which colonial and capitalist incursion disrupted. Secondly, they make available the scholarly framework to future scholars who might be interested in understanding the anthropogenic basis of the food crises and food insecurity that affected the peasants in rural Malawi during the colonial and postcolonial period.

The major weakness of this scholarship, however, is that it treats Africans as a homogeneous entity that uniformly, passively and irreparably succumbed to the disruptive effects of colonial and capitalist incursions. It ignores the heterogeneity of the peasantry based on age, class, gender and political status as well as the variations by which colonialism and capitalism affected such a dynamic composition of the peasantry. These weaknesses originate largely from the scholars' over-reliance on colonial archives, which represented the voices of the colonial administrators and the African elites rather than the voices of the rural masses. Centred on national studies, the scholarship fails to provide details of how colonialism affected food security at the local level.

## **4. Social history and agro-ecological studies in Malawi, 1980 -1990**

The emergence of social history in the early 1970s had far-reaching effects on Malawian historiography in general, and particularly, the historiography of agriculture, the peasantry and food production which started to dominate scholarship from the early 1980s (Hobsbawm 1971:20-45; Joyce 2010:213 -248; Lloyd 1991:180-219). Typical of social history, scholars of this historiography began to move towards analysing the agricultural history of the country from the perspective of the marginalized groups of the rural society such as peasants, workers, women and children. In an attempt to represent the voices of these people, topics that affected the everyday life of rural societies such as the tenancy system, forced labour, taxation and food security were analysed with extensive use of oral sources. The historiography predominantly revolved around three themes: the emergency of the peasantry, food production and irrigation farming.

### **4.1 Capitalist incursions, ecological change and agricultural development**

The first theme was at first pursued by scholars such as John McCracken, Robin Palmer and Robin Palmer, and later Elias Mandala, Owen Kalinga, Wiseman Chirwa and Wapulumuka Mulwafu (McCracken 1982: 21-35; 1983: 172-192; 1989: 63-78; 2012; Palmer 1985: 211-245; Mandala 1990; Kalinga 1993: 367-387; Chirwa 1997: 265-280; Mulwafu 2002a:25-45; 2002b: 201-215; 2010; Green 2007; 2009; 2011; Bolt and Green 2015). Contrary to the nationalist historiography of the 1970s, the scholarship of the 1980s acknowledged the adverse impact of colonialism and capitalism on the African peasantry. However, it puts a footnote below the disruptive nature of colonial capitalism by drawing attention to patterns of peasant rationalism and heterogeneity as well as variations through which they responded to colonial and capitalist incursions in rural Malawi. The major contention of this scholarship is that peasants in Malawi were not passive victims of colonial capitalism. Rather, the peasants acted creatively to minimize its effects through negotiation, resistance, adaptation and resilience. In complex ways, they resisted and negotiated colonial manoeuvres on the rural economies with some degree of success. The scholarship further shows that state interventions into peasant economy through agricultural conservation, which characterized colonial agricultural development policies from the late 1930s and 1940s, failed due to poor timing, ideological incompatibility and the coercive approach by which the colonial state implemented its programs among the peasants.

This scholarship has laid the ground for the historical analysis of the interaction between the peasants and the state. It gives clues to understanding how capitalism shaped the African peasantry. It also demonstrates how the peasants as rational beings creatively adapted to the forces that worked against them by negotiating the terms of their participation. Furthermore, it provides a strategic entry into understanding the manner in

which state interventions shaped and transformed local agricultural technologies. The major weakness of this scholarship is that it discusses the interaction of the peasants and the colonial state in generic sense and concentrates on the confrontational relations that developed between the state and the peasants over conservation. This compromises a critical examination of the extent to which state interventions affected food production among the peasants.

## **4.2 Food production and food security**

The second theme, which preoccupied the social historiography of agriculture from the 1980s, is that of food production and food security. This scholarship came as an intervention into the early historiography of agriculture and peasantry, which centred on narratives of cash cropping at the expense of food production. Besides, the scholarship was a response to the global and regional concerns of the time over the growing food crisis in Africa because of drought recurrences, population increases and civil wars (Berry 1984:59-112; Timberlake 1991). Since the 1970s, there has been growing academic and public interest in food production and consumption as well as food security in Africa. This interest has its origins from the growing concerns over the recurrences of unprecedented cases of hunger, famine and undernourishment, caused largely by drought, population increases and civil wars which came to characterise the ecological landscape of the continent. An African food crisis alarm was first blown at the World Food Conference organised by the United Nations Organisations (UNO) in Rome in 1974 where Africa, which had for long been recognised as a world exporter of food grain, was at the time arguably found the most adversely affected by the global food crisis (Devereux and Maxwell 2011). Between 1986 and 1992, the World Food Committee of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) conducted food surveys, which indicated that, of the 840 million people undernourished in the world, 26% of them were in Africa (FAO 1996). Comparatively, the Horn of Africa and the Sahel region represented the most affected region with the 1984 Ethiopian famine rated as the worst.

In Southern Africa, at a regional conference of food security held by the Southern Africa Development Coordinating Committee (SADCC) in Maseru, Lesotho between 12 and 14 January 1987, it was revealed that Southern Africa was gradually drifting towards a food crisis with Mozambique rated as mostly affected followed by Lesotho, Botswana, Zambia, Angola, Tanzania, Madagascar, Malawi and Namibia (Prah 2001). Malawi, together with Zimbabwe and South Africa, which were at the time credited for grain exportation in the region, had since 2000 joined the countries with serious food deficits (FAO 2015). It is subsequent to such problems that the United Nations Organisation (UNO) made eradication of poverty and hunger its number one goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) of September 2000 (UNO 2000). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which have since 2016 replaced the MGDs have maintained eradication of poverty and hunger as a critical goal (UNO 2016). As noted by Elias Mandala, these concerns were catalytic to the emergence of food scholarship in Africa (Mandala 2005). The pioneers of this historiography were Amartya Sen and

Michael Watts who studied the growth of famine and food insecurity in 1981 and 1983 respectively (Sen 1981; Watts 1983). Since then, food became a subject of scholarly attention in Africa, and Malawian scholars wanted to be part of this intellectual revolution.

Two scholars distinguished themselves as specialists of food scholarship: Megan Vaughan and Elias Mandala. Their scholarship explores the patterns of food production during the pre-colonial and early colonial period. It also demonstrates the manner in which the peasants coped and adapted to ecological and political changes, which over the years threatened their food security in rural Malawi (Vaughan 1982: 351-364; 1987; Mandala 2005; 2006: 505-524). Using the political economy perspective, the scholarship demonstrates how colonial capitalism disrupted rural economies through such policies as land alienation, cash crop production, taxation, labour migration, state control of food marketing and transportation. It argues that these policies succeeded only to increase the vulnerability of peasants to famine and hunger in rural Malawi. It criticises scholars of environmental determinism for allowing racial prejudices to influence their understanding of food insecurity (Thomas and Whittington 1969). But as noted by Megan Vaughan, food security in Malawi, like in any other parts of Africa, should be understood within a broader context of multiple factors in which both ecological and anthropogenic factors shared responsibility (Vaughan 1987). Mandala's work, as noted above, goes beyond the political economy argument by considering food insecurity as an everyday experience of the peasants of the Lower Tchiri valley of southern Malawi rather than an occasional occurrence. <sup>2</sup>In doing this, Mandala's work draws attention to visible co-existence of feasts and famine in the daily, seasonal and the annual routines of the peasant life.

Unlike the earlier historiography of agricultural change and the peasantry, this scholarship has directly, though modestly, placed food production and food security at the core of its analysis. However, the historiography carries overtones of dependence and underdevelopment theories by simplistically presenting a romantic view of pre-colonial Africa as the historical epoch of plenteous and surplus food, and colonial capitalism as the only factors that socio-engineered famine and hunger in rural Africa. Besides, the scholarship is limited in scope, space and time. As promising as Megan Vaughan's works were, their analysis was not only limited to the period before the outbreak of the First World War and the 1948/9 famine, but also confined to the Shire Highlands and the Upper Lower Shire. They also made no effort to explore how the state interacted with the peasants to maintain food security in these areas. While Mandala's studies have managed to explore in detail how the peasants struggled to sustain food security in the face of droughts, floods and competing demands for food, they made little effort to chronicle various ways by which the state promoted food production among the peasants. Besides, the studies dealt largely with peasants' everyday experiences of food security at household rather than communal level, and only drew evidence from the Mang'anja people in the Lower Shire. This limits the universal generalisability of the experiences of the peasants in the country. Important also to note is that the Lower Shire is a distinctive agro-ecological zone often characterised by erratic rainfall, drought and extreme high temperatures. The only ecological consolation of the area is the presence of the Shire River, which brought seasonal floods that provided the Mang'anja an alternative agricultural means of coping with famine and seasonal hunger. There is need to understand how other communities in

the country with different ecologies managed to sustain food security.

### **4.3 The State, peasant irrigation farming and food security**

Related to the above scholarship is the theme of irrigation farming which came to dominate the agricultural historiography from 2002 (Mulwafu and Nkhoma 2002: 839-844; Nkhoma and Mulwafu 2004: 1327-1333; Ferguson and Mulwafu 2007: 211-227; Nkhoma 2011a: 209-223; 2011b: 383-398; Nkhoma and Kayira 2016: 79-84). Drawing evidence from oral sources, archival sources, government documents, field observations, focus group discussions and personal communication, this scholarship has explored the evolution of irrigation farming and the challenges that undermined its success. By focusing on smallholder irrigation schemes that the state constructed, the scholarship affords us a practical example of patterns of state interventions into peasant economy and the possible factors that impinged on such interventions. Although smallholder irrigation has been considered as a panacea to food production in the face of changing climate, its reliance to river diversions which draw their supplies from rains coupled by inability by service providers to take local history and context in their planning, has been a major limiting factor for smallholder irrigation farming to achieve their intended goal. This has led not only to the growth of water related conflicts among the peasants, but also brought the state and local farmers into loggerheads. Although the scholarship has underlined the contribution of irrigation farming to the net food supply of the country, it is limited to the study of formal irrigation schemes, and represents only one form of state interventions into the peasant economy. Besides, the scholarship largely centres on post-colonial irrigation schemes with a focus on the progressive processes under which irrigation policies historically evolved.

## **5. Conclusion**

What this article suggests is that the Malawian historiography has made tremendous effort to analyse the subject of agriculture, ecological change and food production. Using the grand paradigms of modernisation, underdevelopment and social history, the historiography has improved our understanding on the growth of food insecurity in Malawi by drawing our attention to the interplay of ecological and political factors. While the effects of capitalism and colonialism on peasant food production has been noted, however, the study has observed that little progress has been made to analyse the processes and methods by which the peasants produced their foodstuffs and how the processes have progressively changed over the years, especially in the period after the First World War. In other words, the article has contended that the agricultural historiography of Malawi has tended to lean towards the reconstruction of the historical trajectories of food crisis with respect to hunger, malnutrition and famine rather than the actual processes of food production.

The findings concur with the regional historiography which, despite noting the complex, dynamic, contested and varied ways by which capitalism and colonialism affected the African peasantry, has treated food production tangentially along the grand paradigms of

agriculture, ecology and the peasantry (Phimister 1988; Giblin 1992; Moore and Vaughan 1994; Isaacman 1996). As in Malawi, the regional historiography has placed more emphasis on drought, hunger and famine in arguing that peasant famine was a function of political and economic factors than ecological and climatic conditions (Bates 1981; Maddox 1990; Sen 1981; Watts 1983; Wyle 1989:159-199; Illife 1990). Unlike in Malawi, the regional historiography has extended the drought-famine analysis to cover climate history (McCann 1999: 262-279; Carey 2012:233-249; Hannaford 2014: 7-25).

What remains is for this regional historiography to borrow a leaf from the Malawi case which, despite paying a blind eye to climate history, has casually drawn attention to the extent to which rainfall variability affected the productivity of smallholder irrigation farming. Since in most African countries this irrigation farming is predominantly dependent on rainfall for water supply, the analysis of the interface between climate historiography and irrigation historiography would provide historical lessons critical for sustaining irrigation farming which in the present vagaries of climate variability remains the only way forward for maintaining food supply, not only Malawian peasants but also those from the region as well.

## Endnotes

1. Richard Kettlewell served as Director of Agriculture up to 1959, when he was appointed as Minister of Lands, Natural Resources and Surveys in Malawi. He was a firm supporter of modernisation and conservation. John Pike once served as a senior hydrologist in the country between 1952 and 1962.
2. One scholar who has been criticized for making conclusion about African famines based on linear progression thesis is Watts, *Silent Violence*.

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