THE HEATHEN FOR THINE INHERITANCE: EARLY MISSIONARY POETRY IN MALAWI 1893-1901

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The verse written by the early Christian missionaries in Malawi seemed to obey the psalmist's injunction:

> Desire of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. (Psalm 11.8)

for what we observe in most of the poems is a group of zealots, setting forth as labourers (or harvesters) evangelists, knights or physicians into the heart of dark Africa converting and possessing the heathen in the name of the Lord. Of course, some of the poems are just celebrations of the Lord and commentaries on the land, the people and the food, but they are all related to the larger divine purpose of evangelisation. The discussion will follow this pattern, then, the missionaries venturing forth, celebrating the divine and making observations about the natives, the land and the food. But first a little background to the publications in which the poems were found and the institutions the poets represented.

The Christian Missionary Presence 1857-1901

The Christian missionaries came to British Central Africa (later called Nyasaland and, after independence, Malawi) in response to Dr David Livingstone's 1857 call to send missionaries and traders to replace the illegitimate slave trade. Two waves of Scottish missionaries came to the country: the Universities Mission to Central

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Africa (UMCA) in 1860 and the Free Church of Scotland in 1875. The former settled in the southern part and the latter in the northern part of the country.

The following quotations establish the context in which both waves of missionaries found themselves. The southern and northern ends of the country were particularly troublesome parts in terms of both the slave and ivory trade. The Yaos, the central tribe dealing directly with the Swahili and Arab traders of the east coast of Africa were in the south.

> At the south end of the lake, the Arab chief Mponda, ruled and his villages were a hot bed of vice, villainy and slavery. From west to east the chiefs sent dhowfuls of slaves without let or hindrance. Villages which in the morning were haunts of peace; often in the evening were but smoking ashes, mother and child lay there pierced by the one spear; old men and women lay in the embers clubbed to death; but the young and strong were hurried to the lake and the dhows were filled with the bereaved and the hopeless, whose crying and whose moans were wafted by the winds. All over the lake dhows bore the cargoes of agonised humanity.[1]

The southern Yaos plundered south, south east, east and south west and north west around the lakeshore area. In the center and the north, north west and north east the Ngonis devastated the country inland as far as the lakeshore, too.

> Further north, to the west of the lake lay the valleys of the Angoni, an off-shoot of the Zulu nation. Under the sway of the ruthless Mombera, they laid waste the land. "I have seen an army, ten thousand strong," writes Dr Elmslie, "issue forth in June and not return till September, laden with spoil in slaves, cattle, and ivory, and nearly every man painted with white clay, denoting that he had killed someone".[2]

Whether or not the settlements near these tribes were pre-planned is beside the point. What is at issue here is that the first wave of Christian missionaries were

working close to the trouble spots and the tribes that were decimating the country and laying waste its human and elephant resources.

The quotations also establish the context in which the poems discussed here were written. Hence the resort to quoting at length. These are the missionary poets, the people they worked with, and the attitudes they brought with them or were prevailing at the time.

Early Missionary Periodicals

I have discussed elsewhere the beginnings and growth of literacy and local publications.[3] The information will not be repeated here. What has not been done before is to put together the same for the press, focussing on the early newspapers and periodicals produced by the Christian missionaries.[4] Only a brief outline will be attempted here.

The poetry discussed here spans nine years only from 1893 to 1901. Before and after these years there was nothing in this genre published in the local press. The strongest reasons for this absence are first, prior to this period the local outlets had not yet been established and afterwards the outlets had ceased publication. The second reason is that the contributors were also deceased. It usually was the same less than ten contributors, so it was easy to know whether or not they had published elsewhere during or after this period. The other reasons for ceasing publication will be exfoliated as the discussion progresses.

The outlets involved in missionary verse were also small, only three: *Central Africa*, *Nyasa News* and *Aurora*. *Central Africa*, the earliest, was a monthly established in 1883. It run until 1898. Although it was the earliest to be founded, poetry only started appearing in 1897. *Nyasa News* underwent a change of names. It started as "An Occasional Paper for Nyasaland" in 1893, had two numbers only, then turned into a quarterly in the same year under the new name. It ceased publication in 1895. The first poetry contributions started appearing in the maiden issue. The *Aurora* started in 1897 and ceased in 1901.

There were other periodicals coming in and out of existence during the same period. The most famous one is *Life and Work in British Central Africa* founded in 1888. The other famous but secular one was *The British Central Africa Gazette* started in 1893. However, outside the ones mentioned above, none carried verse, more especially missionary verse. Hence, they will not be mentioned any more hereafter.

It is worthwhile to quote an observer commenting on one of these early missionary periodicals. Of *Central Africa:* "seldom has a missionary publication kept up continuously so high a level of interest". [5] Of *Nyasa News*: "The paper was popular in British Central Africa"[6] So, the periodicals seem to have been rated highly by the readers. And who were the readers? The editor of the *Nyasa News* has this to say:

> Remember always, in your criticims, that we write primarily for people out here (i.e. Nyasaland), and, secondly so as to catch the ears of influential people in high places at home...[7] When you read... (it) must be criticised from that standpoint.[8]

So, the primary audience was local, however, the intention was also to influence the opinions of well positioned people back home in England. The present criticisms also consider the local current environment.

How much influence the missionary periodicals had will be guaged from another source:

> This was not simply a vehicle for missionary news but was a regular bearer of political news and comment... The magazine also served as a vehicle for criticism of the Protectorate's administration. [9]

Although the quotation refers to *Life and Work in British Central Africa* it represents the political agenda of most of the missionary newspapers and periodicals also. The editors or editorial boards saw their publications as political instruments to influence, pressurize and effect change in the local colonial and church administration, too.

It is safe to assume with the above observations, then, that the poetry under discussion here had also political dimensions underlying it. The degree of politicisation, of course, varied from poet to poet and depended on the themes tackled. It will be seen, however, that the colonial and church politics were really on the "native question": what to do with the heathen. The major themes appearing are on evangelisation, divine providence, the land (country), the people and the food.

The bulk of the discussion analyses the above themes. The accompanying (rather lengthy) quotations are included for the benefit of the readers unfamiliar with the corpus since it only exists in the archives or rare Africana collections. The illustrations also serve to give a flavour of the originals. After the analysis I am going to evaluate the poems as works of art. Here I am going to fall back upon a contemporary missionary editor's "poetics" to do the poets justice. Finally I shall tackle the issue of "audience": for whom was the poetry really written?

The Heathen for Thine Inheritance

In this group of poems the central theme is evangelisation: the setting forth of a group of labourers, harvesters or healers and the finding of converts in the dark land of Africa. Two poems "Missionary Hymn" by "E.M.B." [10] and "Whom Shall I Send? And Who Will Go For Us?" [11] by an unnamed member of the UMCA deal directly with the quest for volunteers, and those who will answer the call of Christ to go into the vineyard to harvest the ripened fruit. Two other poems "A Knight of Christ" by "K" [12] and "Medical Missions" by Whittier [13] address themselves to members who have answered the call and are about to go or are already in the field tending to God's flock. The last poem "The Daughter of a King" from an unspecified selection ("Selected") gives us a picture of an actual convert or a harvest. [14] This is the general movement of the poems.

"Missionary Hymn" is professedly a hymn or a prayer. The suppliants first invoke the Lord, reminding him of the promise He made to His son, Christ:

"Ask of Me, and I will give Thee
All the heathen for Thine own,
Earth's remotest bounds shall worship
Kneeling at Thy kingly throne."

The reminder is followed by the request: send the labourers to harvest the ripened fruit. The Lord should call some from among the suppliants to go and preach to the heathen so that they can hear God's message, too. The results will be the kingdom come and praise to Christ the King.

"Whom Shall I Send? And Who Will Go For Us?" seems to be the companion poem to the first prayer. It is God's response to the prayer and also poses the question of who is going to be the labourer. The title of the poem is the refrain that rings in different forms at least four times:

Whom shall I send as preacher? And who will be my priest?
* * *
But whom will go as preacher? And who will by my priest?
* * *
Is half my church at work there? And who will be my priest?
* * *
Who will go out there for Us to brethren sore in need?

The person talks of the wilderness that is "this England" which has turned its back to salvation and turned to materialism. He will start with this land before going on to "those other sheep" living in sin who have never heard of the 'Saviour'". This is the "other half" of the vineyard which should not be ignored. As the questions become more insistent and imperative, the answer is:

Send me_and me_and me_and me_"from greatest to least
Send me to be Thy preacher; and by Thy grace I pray
I'll turn the hearts of thousands now wandering from Thy way;
* * *
Lord, I will be Thy holy priest, and daily will I plead
Before Thy Holy Altar; e'en as Thyself decreed;
* * *
Lord, open Thou Thy church's ears to hear Thy call so clear
And if Thou callest me, O Lord, oh may, oh may I hear."

If the call has been made in the poem above the next two pieces are focussed on the called: the knights and the doctors of Christ, venturing forth into the unknown. The previous poem warns those who go out into the wilds. There is loneliness there and only a few souls genuinely repent their sins or are responsive to the word of God. They will be working in very unfamiliar surroundings but go they must.

"Medical Missions" takes up the warning of the previous poem further

The paths of pain are thine. Go forth
With patience, trust and hope,
The sufferings of a sin-sick earth
Shall give thee ample scope.

The poem does not give details of the medical missions as such. It is more valedictory than descriptive infusing the itinerant physician with encouraging examples of Christ doing the same. The same power will come

From Him who went about
The Syrian hillsides doing good,
And casting demons out.

The Good Physician liveth yet
The friend and guide to be;
The Healer by Gennesaret
Shall walk the rounds with thee.

The doctor on the African soil is not alone on his rounds: Christ is with him always.

The next poem "A Knight of Christ" is also uplifting in its sentiments as it bids the labourer

Go, make free the slaves of sin,
By the Spirit's power within;
* * *
Christ's lost jewels thou shalt find-
Diamonds, white and black, to gem
Our Redeemer's diadem

The quest for this knight is for the lost jewels in Africa not only black ones but also white ones. The image of Christ's diadem is quite evocative not only of the crown but also of the wreath on the cross which proclaimed Him Christ the King of Jews.

Christ, as king, is echoed in the last poem in this group: "The Daughter of a King" where the persona comes upon one of the black diamonds.

A lean, decrepit hag, scarce worth a thought:
Like one of many thousands seen around, and worse.

It is as if he has really come upon a lost jewel in the midst of all the desolation he finds on his rounds. The poem is narrative and describes the persona's encounter with one of the converts where he least expected them. He tried to communicate to her using common human terms: who he was, where he came from. But she was not interested. He persisted by talking about familiar sons and friends. But there was no response from her. He finally spoke of Jesus.

Her face grew bright, radiant from her eyes
Leaped animation, love and joy. Her soul
I clearly saw 'Jesus I love,' she said
And fell to praising Him. 'He is my joy,'
My life, my all the world. He only loves
He only knows the love I keep for him.'
And so she grew alive. No rags I saw,
But life, real life moved here in such a place-
The giant soul within a skeleton.

The poem ends on an evangelical note we started out with. The first two poems prayed for labourers or harvesters, the next two found knights and physicians, the last one gives us one of the labourers coming upon a harvest, however meagre it is.

The last poem also answers the question of who will be sent into the wilds in a neat way.

We passed a lonely place, a few stray huts,
A krall in darkest heathen kaffirland
I said, 'How desolate! Who tends to these souls?'
* * *
I'd asked. The answer lay
Within the hut. God cares for them, and she
For Him, to satisfy His heart.

In other ways, the Lord will find ways of reaching those he wants saved, however few the labourers and however meagre the harvest. And the Lord takes care of His own.

Divine Celebration

The next group of poems are celebrations of the divine: "Providence," "A Sabbath Morning Song" [15] and the "The Song Divine," all by "K.[17]

"Providence" is a straightforward poem in the psalmist style.

O'er His Own earth doth walk our God.
And flowers spring up where He hath trod.
he passeth thro' the desert drear,
Oases cool and green appear.
He calms the hollows' raging wrath
With footsteps on an unknown path.

It is a praise poem that lists the Lord's attributes to the very end. It could also have been written anywhere since it contains no local references to Africa or England.

"A Sabbath Morning Song" is a homage on the tender, loving care of God. It puts the celebrant in the role of a child and God as both a mother and a father.

"A little child knows not the things
In earth and sky and air
It only knows its mother's face,
Her voice and loving care;
With 'sweet content' it lies at rest
In her dear arms upon her breast.

The poem contrasts the other awesome qualities of the Lord in thunderstorms, war, which he could sing about. However, on his sabbath hour he has chosen the gentler side of God the mother and God the caring father.

I know that round and underneath,
The everlasting arms
Enfold me in their tender strength,
Secure from rude alarms:
And over me my Father's face
Is bent with looks of pitying grace

It is evocative of a holy family with the child enfolded in tenderness, love and care of both parents. And it ends in Christ's call to all children, "Come to Me."

The peacefullness painted in the previous poem is shattered in the next one by the same author. "The Song Divine" takes the image of the spheres in which creation sings. However, the persona can not hear it. He is out of tune because of sin.

Sin hath made discordant voices
Drown creation's Hymn of June
Who will teach this heart of mine
To take up the Song Divine?

The persona cannot blend with the valleys, the hills, the oceans, the hills and birds singing in harmony. Full of sin, he can only produce "poor music" because the strings are slack and broken. Sin alloys his music and his musical instrument. He prays for refinement:

Master, tune this instrument
To accord with Thine intent
* * *

Put thy spirit, Lord, in me:
Draw forth sweetest minstrelsy
* * *

Bid discordant voices cease;

So that he can harmonise back with all creation in singing creation's songs of praise.

As can be seen from the above analysis, this group of poems is concerned with the joys of being with the Lord and the pangs of being without him. The next group of poems takes up the idea of the hills, valleys, oceans and birds celebrating the Lord, a bit further.

The Land, the People, and the Food

It would have been surprising to have all these poems talking about evangelisation and celebrating divine creation, without once mentioning the environment in which all these things are happening. This last group of poems focusses on certain apsects of the country as starting points to make larger comments about life in general. The first three poems "Lake Nyasa" [18], "Lake Nyasa", by "YZ"[19] and "Nyasa Winds" By "B"[20] are on the big lake. The fourth one "The Awful Y_Tribe" by "A.F." is obviously on the Yao peoples.[21] The last on "The Plaint of an African Fowl" by "YZ" is on the woes of an African chicken at the hands or the pots or the mouths of a missionary.[22]

The lake itself has moved even prose writers to comment on its beauty and ability to appeal to the imagination.

> ....its vastness appeals to the imagination..there is a haunting flush of loveliness on the face of Nyasa. There is the glory of sunlight such as never shines on pale northern climes; there is the vividness of colouring as the hills draw their purple and gold mantles around them, and there are the mystery and the marvel of the night when the moon uprises, and the ripples on the water reflect her light in long ribbons, fading gradually within the veil of the night, and along the broad pathway of silver light, the heart and soul wander afar until they come to the source of all the infinite. That man is surely blind for whom on Lake Nyasa the veil will not sooner or later become thin...[23].

The above quotation does not relate the lake to literary inspiration. The next one actually sees Homeric correspondences:

> The black ships and the ship of Ulysses, which alone is notable as vermilion, do not seem foreign to the old canoes of the lake, black, or painted, one here and there, with the red earth used for pots. He who wore the panther's skin has his fellow in many an Angoni warrior; above all, the spear of the son of Peleus is contrasted with the bow carried by men on the side of Troy; yet the bow is honoured specially by the use of Apollo. We see the spear points all agog to tear the enemy, as they were with Mputa and Malepa and Gwangwara, and the arrow striking from a distance; and when a slave dhow comes along the Lake with guns ranged round the bulwarks, ready to be taken up when the Mission steamer becomes too inquisitive, we see Philoktetes and his boatmen, each with his bow at his hand.[24]

It is with these two prose quotations, one dwelling on the physical side and the other on the literary side that we may best approach what the poetic imagination has made of Lake Nyasa.

The first poem of Lake Nyasa talks about the changefulness of the lake. Sometimes it rages, sometimes it is calm. This time it is gloomy with "dark sullen clouds" and a storm has sprung up. All this signifies discord not only in the elements but also

> In the hearts of men, which God will one day make
> His own forever, with radiance bright
> Of His High Presence - Earth's Eternal Light

The contrast between the dark and light of the earth is the image used for people who walk in the brightness of the Lord and those who live in spiritual darkness.

The pathetic fallacy of using the lake as a living symbol of spiritual darkness and light, emotional or physical calmness or disturbance is also exploited in "Lake Nyasa" by the same author. Here the waters are "lonely" they "murmur" and hold "a lofty message" which they "bring" only

To minds attuned to high imagining
And spirits musing on Eternity;
* * *
To speak to us of Him, who in His hand
Thy waters broad uplifts;

Here again the lake is an instrument used to some divine purpose: to bring God's message to man.

"Nyasa Winds" focusses on the winds that blow over the lake during the different seasons. Each of the four stanzas is devoted to a wind: east, south, west and north in that order. Each mention of a wind is followed by a comment on whether or not the persona likes it. The persona does not like the east winds from Indian Seas because they are hot, dry and parch up the land. Everything withers up in their wake. Although the south winds are fierce, rude and boisterous they come from the "land of the gold" and "future promise". The persona loves best the fragrance brought by the west winds coming from inland bringing "cool and tempered sighs". He also likes the northern breeze blowing from the great lakes. However, this wind seldom visits the land.

The poem would have been a simple one just delighting in the persona's relationship with or feelings about each wind. However, in the last two lines it makes its point and the reason why the persona is found in this land.

The shores of lands in darkness yet,
The lands of the tusk and slave

He is in the land of the ivory and slave traders, not only in the land of the heathen. And the tribe behind both enterprises is the Yao, the subject of the next poem.

"The Awful Y_Tribe" is an open indictment of the Yao. The seven stanzas list the felonies, misdemeanors, crimes of commission or omission that can be heaped on a stigmatised group.

When pretty fronds by riverbank
You find all cut away,
You've only got one tribe to thank
One tribe in B.C.A.

If on the road your goods are lost
And never do appear
With anxious doubts be not storm-tossed
It is the Y_s, that's clear

If slaves are run, or slaves are sold
Or should you hear they're bought,
No other tribe could be so bold
No other need be sought

The poem ends with the prayer that they would run the tribe out of the country. Some of the reasons for this deep hatred of the Yaos are given in the poem. The other reasons are discussed later. Suffice to say here that at least one missionary poet addressed himself, not only to the question of converting the heathen but unleashing his hatred for one particular group of heathen.

The last poem is by another poet who gives vent to his feelings against consumers of the local African food in general and the chicken in particular. "The Plaint of an African Fowl" is a defense against the usual complaint, which is also quoted at the opening of the poem: "I had nothing whatever to eat but a beastly tough skinny old African fowl".

The persona does not only defend the chicken, he speaks with the voice of the "despised and much abused bird" which is prepared in all sorts of ways: roasted, boiled and fried: in different forms too, to make it palatable *Vol au vent*, curry or pie. The whole poem is a description of how on one hand the people who despise it prepare it and on the other how if they detested it they still take great pains to make it palatable. The African chicken is quite central to the society:

I'm battered for, haggled for, everywhere,
Beads, calico, go in exchange,
To buy me you'll send many miles here and there,

Yet the chicken is accused of being all bones, too stringy and tough, is sickly, it brings chicken cholera. In spite of all these things it is dismembered with gusto:

Oh, 'tis cruel to think how my limbs all are fixed,
When for table my flesh you prepare,
Legs, wings, back, and breast, - these get horribly mixed,
Which is which, I scarce know I declare.

For you split me right open - most shocking sights!
And flatten my legs and my wings,
Run a spit through my liver, my heart and my lights,
Choice morsels you deem them, - these things.

Even the process of cooking is described in great detail:

Then you baste me, and boil me, till I'm brown,
While you turn me this side and that,
* * *
If fricasse palls, when I'm stewed if you strike,
Then you serve me as *pilau* - with rice.
* * *
What with mustard and pepper, and salt too, and sage,
Though 'devilled', I'm monstrously good.
* * *
Then with raisins, you bet, and with sauces and lard,
I'm a savoury mess in a bowl,

It goes on and on enumerating this love-hate relationship between the bird and the eater and ends with a call to stop all this inconsistent, incomprehensible and hypocritical behaviour:

Ah, its all very well to grumble and grovel,
And say you have nothing to eat
Though I'm skinny, perhaps, and only a fowl,
There are times when you find me a treat.
* * *
Oh, 'tis mean, all this talk about 'stringy and hard,'
And 'beastly old African fowl'.

Come, bid all your calumny to the winds fly
And cease at me sourly to gird
Just allow that in spite of the popular cry
I'm not such a very bad bird.

We have come a long way from labourers, venturing forth into the field as knights and physicians, hymns celebrating the Lord's grace and the music of the spheres to subversive chickens in the heart of heathen Africa. We now turn to an evaluation of these poems in terms of some of their literary achievements.

Verses that Won't Scan: The Poetics of Missionary Verse

These poems, written by several hands, have dealt with missionary or religious subjects from many angles. And as indicated earlier, even the apparently secular objects have an underlying religious element. Here we have 14 to 60-line poems: sonnets, lyrics and ballads by no less than ten different versifiers publishing in three different newspapers belonging to more or less the same Christian protestant Graeco-Roman nineteenth century western poetics. The question now is how effective are they in their composition?

A spokesman of this group is one of the editors who laid down the critera for acceptance for publication.

> verses that won't scan and rhymes that don't rhyme, hardly deserve a place. Poetical licenses are allowable in poets because they write poetry, but mere verse makers - and none of us can lay claim to a higher title - must really obey the ordinary and obvious rules of versification, or be ready to acquiesce in the Editorial decision that consigns their verses to the waste paper basket.[25]

The editor was very demanding in that rules of poetic composition had to be adhered to if the writers wanted to be published. Qualitative standards were the same whether in a missionary or secular newspaper, whether in England or out in the African bush. In the same editorial he demonstrates that he can also write poetry that rhymes and scans

> Dear writers of verse for the "News"
> (Though chaffing, we're not all in fun,)
> To admit you can scarcely refuse
> That lines should not halt, but should run!
>
> And when you laurels have won,
> Don't think us as stubborn as mules
> For daring your verses to shun,
> When you didn't quite keep to the rules.

Keeping to the rules the editor did, both in his rejections and in his instructions. His stanza to say the least, has an *ababbcdc* scheme so the lines conform to the scancion rules. The above stanza was appended to a burlesque of poor versifiers which I will now quote in full.

Ballade of the Incompetent Ballade-monger
I am not ambitious at all:
I am not a poet, I know,
(Though I do love to see a mere scrawl
To order and symmetry grow).
My muse is uncertain and slow
I am not expert with my tools
I lack the poetic argot:
But I hope I have kept the rules

When your brain is undoubtedly small,
'Tis hard, sir, to write in a row,
Some five or six rhymes to Napaul,
And more than a dozen to Joe:
The metre is easier though,
Three rhymes are sufficient for 'ghouls',
My lines are deficient in go,
But I hope I have kept to the rules.
Unable to fly let me crawl,
Your patronage kindly bestow:
I am not the author of Saul,
I am not Voltaire or Rousseau:
I am not desirous, oh no!
To rise from the ranks of the fools,
To shine with Gosse, Dobson and Co.
But I hope I have kept to the rules.[27]

While poking satiric fun at incompetent versifiers the writer demonstrates his own accomplishment at a very difficult metre and rhyme scheme. This is perhaps why the poetic harvest of the period was also meagre: the technical hurdles were high, many and difficult to acquire.

Those who got published had mastered the basic rules of poetic composition. "K"s "Providence" and "Y.Z."s two "Lake Nyasa" poems are sonnets in their own right. Fourteen line sonnets in each case, though, with different rhyme schemes. "Providence has *aabbccddeeffgg*, "Lake Nyasa" has *abbacddceffegg* and "Lake Nyasa Two has *abbacddcefgfgf* with a somewhat forced rhyme in *d/d* "eternity"/ "die". Two poems use couplets throughout. The forty-four lines of "Whom Shall I Send?" by a member of the UMCA and the twenty-four lines of "A Knight of Christ" by "K" are both in neat couplets. The ballad form noted above has also been adopted by two other poets in "The Awful Y_Tribe" by "A.F." and "The Plaint of an African Fowl" by "YZ". Four other poems are purely lyrical or hymnal celebrating or worshipping the divine or the environment "Missionary Hymn" by "EMB", "Medical Missions" by Whittier, "A Sabbath Morning Song" by "K" and "The Song Divine by "K". One poem is an ode, "Nyasa Winds" by "B" and the last one "The Daughter of a King"(Selected) has no rhyme or pattern to it.

The last two pieces give us some points for critising some of the poetry in this group. "Nyasa Winds" has four stanzas each addressing the points of the compass from where the different kinds of winds come. It does not make any profound or original statement about the four winds or the lake itself which we did not know before. The poet'sstatement of how he feels about each wind and the conclusion that the land is still in darkness and at the hands of the ivory and slave traders do not elevate it above the cliche-like statements of each line or stanza.

The point made here is best illustrated by comparing the poem with a prose account of the winds of Lake Nyasa. W P Johnson's *Nyasa, the Great Water* takes time to give the local names, descriptions and even native legends of the winds blowing on the lake and the surrounding lands. He gives "Mwera," the south-west monsoon as the chief wind as the most violent one blowing from April to September. It is only rivalled by "Lilinga" the north-west wind. Both winds come from a clear sky to raise storms on the lake. The following is the legend explaining the rivalry and the fact that "Lilinga" is not so common and does occur with its "Mwera" rival.

> A man had two children, a son and a daughter, and both fell ill and died. The body of the son was taken north and became the Lilinga, the body of the daughter was taken south and became the Mwera. They do not blow together, for the brother hears the clouds thundering down south and says: "My sister wants to move now," and so keeps quite. Later the sister hears his signal and so the south wind rests.[28]

"Vuma" the east wind, is the next in importance. Although it has the touch of the north wind in it, it is really a local wind. The north wind prevails from October to March and is known as "he that missses no harbours" in the southern section where it becomes very violent. The west wind is known to be a very gentle one. These are the major winds.

The lesser winds and more local ones are "Bana" a south-west wind, "Makanga" also from the south-west. The latter is associated with the moon when both the satellite and the wind manifest themselves over the hills after midnight near Likoma island. Sporadic tornadoes come from the lake sometimes from the hills after devasting the countryside, houses and vegetation. So do minor whirlwinds.

The above account borrows heavily from WP Johnson just to demonstrate what a writer who is familiar with the subject matter can come up with. These local details, which add flavour if not enrich the text, are lacking in the poetry that assays to describe the winds on the lake. The dissatisfaction felt with the poem increases when one detects echoes of other odes like "Ode to the West Wind" by Shelley and "Sweet and Low" by Tennyson. The poem, then, seems derivative of other earlier poems.

In poeticising Lake Nyasa one does require all the information that an observer like W P Johnson, who not only gave the different names of the winds, blowing over it but also divided the waters into different sections, a missionary bent on the arduous task of evangelising recalcitrant tribes would not be expected to know this and even to use it in his poetry. However, if he chooses to write poetry he must demonstrate in the texture of the poetry that he is aware it exists. Lack of awareness of the local attitudes, myths and legends produces the poetry of plain statement which is being discussed here. The poet, I feel, must be under "the spell" of the lake which W P Johnson talks about in "the challenge of the lake" in *My African Reminiscences.*

> ...the spell of the lake... is a challenge to find an underlying unity which will include everything in the lake, ugliness as well as beauty; it is a longing to find a true solution of the meaning of the whole sight of God...so longing...in the first place one must try to see the Lake 'as it is;' and in the second, one must search for an answer to the riddle it presents with every spark of light that God vouchsafes to grant...There are two sides to most things and certainly it is so with our Lake.[29]

Perhaps Chauncy Maples in his "Lake Nyasa" sonnets came close to this dual quality of depicting the lake. Even W P Johnson quotes his "Lake Nyasa" (1) in the preliminaries of his *Reminiscences*. In any case the poet's sister considered both among his most happy efforts. (Ellen Maples: C M Green AC. . ondon: Longman 1897. p34). Chauncy Maples himself was satisfied enough with them to publish them in *Nyasa News*. It is significant thatChauncy Maples felt close enough to the lake to drown in it at the end of his work. His sister records the following conversation with him before he died.

> They were talking together of his work, and in the course of conversation something must have been said on the subject of marriage, for the friend remarked, "A bishop must be the husband of one wife." "Yes," replied Maples, with a merry twinkle in his eye, "I have married Lake Nyasa." "And now," writes the friend, "Lake Nyasa is widowed."[30]

The other poem "The Daughter of a King," contrary to the editorial requirments has no rhyme scheme although it has internal rhythm of a kind. However, it reads like prose. It is anecdotal with the different stages of the narrative marked by a paragraph-like indentation. The first two stanzas will illustrate the point more clearly.

> We passed a lonely place, a few stray huts,
> A kraal in darkest heathen Kaffirland.
> I said, 'How desolate! Who tends to these souls?'
> As we were going off a young man stood
> To beg of me to come to his house.

Full of late it was. The day was spent. The way
Lay straight and hard before us.
I followed him. On hands and knees we crept
Into the dirty hut and looked around.
'Now what is it?' "There at our feet,' said he.
'This bundle on the ground?'
'Tis only rags.'
'It is my mother,' said the son, with pride.
Then down stooped he, removed the clothes, and called
And, coaxing, strove to wake her.

If it had been written in continuous form it would be a straight forward account of an ordinary event in the daily rounds of a missionary in Africa.

The thin line between poetry and prose can also be detected in some of the pieces which technically are accomplished because of line-length, variation and a rhyme scheme. "Medical Missions" is a worrisome piece. The poem opens with

The paths of pain are thine. Go forth
With patience, trust and hope
The suffering of a sin-sick earth
Shall give thee ample scope

At first glance these are very simple words, common sayings of the religious circles. They scan very well and, of course, there is a strong rhyme scheme. Where is the poetry outside the metre and rhyme? We have to look for other devices used to raise the cliche-like lines to the status of poetry. The sibilants in "paths," "Patience," "trust," "suffering," "sin-sick," "shall," "scope;" the plosives in "paths," pain," "go," patience," "trust," hope," "ample," "scope." The fricatives in "paths," "thine," "forth," "with," "earth," "there." All these add to the musicality of the rhythm and rhyme. Added to which a "sin-sick earth" is quite a vivid and powerful metaphor. We suddenly realise that we are in the presence of poetry and not Christian slogans or cliches.

One could also critise the poet for the blatant racism of "The Awful Y - Tribe." It is the only example in verse of the deep-seated hatred, loathing, if not contempt the Christian missionaries had for the Yao tribe. The Yao represented, on one level, slavery and slave which the missionaries had come to stamp out. It also represented the ivory trade which was illegitimate trade since it brought in intertribal and economical warfare all-round. On anotherlevel the Yaos represented the Arab race and the Moslem religion. Centuries of crusades and jihads were brought face to face on this tiny African soil. In the end all the racial prejudices that the Christian missionaries suppressed when they did the rounds in heathen Africa seemed to bubble up when the Yao were mentioned:

For nought in it but bad we see.
It's very name we hate

Be sure of this, when any deed
Of evil has been done,
There can but be where it could breed
Of races only one.

No other tribe could fall so low,
Or steal, or drink, or lie
No other native skulks, oh no,
So keep him in your eye.

The Yaos, it seems, were an embodiment of all the evils that could be heaped on the black man.

It's not surprising that it was published: the same newspapers were conducting prose debates in articles, letters and editorials how to combat the Moslem/ Mohammedanism, Arab/Yao threat in British Central Africa.

The criticism that could be levelled at this poetry may be on the triviality of some of the subject matter. "The Plaint of an African Fowl" is a case in point. It starts on the grand note of:

Come hearken, ye gallants of British BCA;
To "The Plaint of an African Fowl,"
Be generous for one as ye list to a lay
That should make you ashamed of your howl.

All fifteen stanzas and sixty lines are in this vein and end with the exhortation.

Come, bid all your calumny to the winds fly
And cease at me sourly to gird,
Just allow that in spite of the popular cry
I'm not such a very bad bird.

Granted that any topic under the sun is the subject for poetry. Granted that some great poetry has been written on the flying kind, too. The point is, this poem was written in May 1894 in what Western Europe considered the heart of heathen Africa. Not only were the missionaries plagued by the Yaos with their slave and ivory raiding, the Ngoni's infecane, mosquitoes and malaria, marauding lions and leopards, sickness and deaths, loneliness and holiness. In the face of all these harrowing experiences who would want to sit down to write a ballad on a tough African chicken?

I would like to ignore the criticisms for the moment and state that it is amazing that the missionaries actually sat down to write poetry at all under all these difficult circumstances.

The Impact or Legacy of Missionary Verse

Before assessing the legacy of the group of poems discussed here I would like to indicate the success of the missions in transforming this part of Africa by quoting from one of the contemporary observers.

> In the history of the advance of civilization, there has been no nobler record than that which tells how the Livingstonia Mission of the United Free Church of Scotland turned war into peace, cruelty into mercy and the cries of perishing races into the psalms of thanksgiving along the shores of Lake Nyasa.[31]

After examining the form and content we now examine their literary heritage: the significance and impact they have made in the context they were created.

Are these poems representative of the Christian missionaries they arise from? It is significant that the fourteen poems discussed here were published between 1893 and 1901. Before this period, undeniably, there were no local newspapers. (Of course, the poets could have published back home, but they did not). After this period no more verse by missionary hands was published. All publications were in other genres (autobiography, travel, reports, histories, primers, grammars, translations, histories, anthropologies, folklore, etc.) Granted also that *Nyasa News* ceased publication after 1895. But the other outlets continued and flourished, there were new ones also.

It is significant also that when vernacular newspapers like *Kalilole*, or *Kalata* were founded and local talent was encouraged to contribute the form chosen for self-expression was not verse (although song compositions in Ngoni and Tumbuka flourished around this period, too, and thereafter). Here, too, local contributions were in other genres. The country had to wait for more than sixty years before local poets started contributing to the newspapers.

This suggests several things. The genre is a difficult one for self expression especially in religious themes. However, there have been great religious poetry including epics written in the English language before these publications. There might have also been only a few practitioners in the genre. Which missionaries in their right senses in the wilds of the country would turn to poetry in writing as a form of recreation anyway? Furthermore, the standards set by the editors were too high to be reached by the general run of the mill missionary who at this time tended to be of a more practical (functional) frame of mind. These observations are in fact supported by the editorial quoted earlier. It starts with:

> We have received various copies of verses intended for insertion, and though "the cry is still they come", we have felt forced to reject them all. We do not, of course, expect the poetic instinct that may lurk in one and another of our fellow countrymen out here to reach a high state of development, nor do we refuse to publish verses because they are scarcely worthy to rank beside the effusions of certain well-known living poets

> who are now gracing the *fin de siecle* with strains that bid fair to become familiar to future generations of men to whom English thought and English metrical expression of it is dear. But even in a newspaper of such modest pretensions as we boast, we are of opinion that verses that won't scan and rhymes that don't rhyme, hardly deserve a place.

There were several practitioners, then, contributing but not high quality material. The editors' standards, too, were high and uncompromising across the board. The contributions had to be comparable with other practitioners at the *fin de siecle*. One feels, though, from the condescending tone of the quotation that it was enough to turn off any fountains of poetic inspiration.

It is an established fact that there was no poetry published in the local newspapers after 1901. This means the verse had had no impact on the local readers. Here, too, one needs to examine who read newspapers like *Nyasa News*, *Central Africa*, and *Aurora?* To all intents and purposes these were written and read by white missionaries, some administrators and traders or planters. Newspapers like *Central Africa* were professedly "a Monthly record of the work of the UMCA "to be consumed by the members themselves. The wife of the editor of *Nyasa News* said:

> It was intended to appeal to the colonists and officials in British Central Africa outside the missionary interest ... for the European residents generally.[33]

The converts, in any case, had not reached that level of literacy in the English language to understand or even be interested to know what was going on around them. Literacy around this time was not very high even in the vernacular. The most highly educated African at this time was the native teacher who had done ten years of vernacular classes. This highly educated man, we are told by some sources had the vernacular Bible, Hymn Book and the Primer as the only contents of his personal library.[34]

This educated African was also the most highly paid person in the country at the time. However, he could not afford to buy these English newspapers because to

buy the Bible was one month's pay or the price of one sheep, the hymn book was a fortnight's pay and the newspapers the price of a live fowl.

Apart from affordability, after reading the poems and noting their sentiments one could hardly conclude that they were written for the "heathen" themselves, however educated they might have been at this or any other time.

Notes

1. Norman MacClean, *Africa in Transformation.* (London: James Nisbet & Co Ltd, 1914) pp. 86-87
2. MacClean, *Africa in Transformation*, p87.
3. Steve Chimombo, "Evangelization and Literacy in Malawi," *Religion in Malawi,* November 1988, pp21-27. See also, Steve Chimombo, "Problems of Book Pricing: A Historical Perspective", a paper presented at the Na tional Seminar on the Book Development Council, Blantyre, 19-21 July, 1989.
4. I am aware of the valuable work on the early press by people like Steve Mwiyeriwa and Clemence Namponya, however, their focus was on the print ing presses and the publishers. More work focussing on the newspapers and periodicals, form and content, needs to be done. Hence, my statement.
5. A.E.M. Anderson-Morshead, *The History of the UMCA* Vol 1, 1859-1909, new and revised edition (London: UMCA, 1955) pp 116-117.
6. Ellen Maples, *Chauncy Maples,* (London: Longman Green & Co, 1897) pp 353-354.
7. Maples, *Chauncy Maples,* p. 35
8. Maples, *Chauncy Maples,* p. 342
9. Bridglal Pachai (ed.) *Livingstone: Man of Africa Memorial Essays 1873-1973,* (London: Longman Group Ltd 1973) p.211.
10. E.M.B. "Missionary Hymn", *Central Africa,* XVX, 1897, p.170
11. Unnamed Member, "Whom Shall I Send?", *Central Africa,* XVI, No 181, 1898, pp.24-25.
12. K, "A Knight of Christ", *The Aurora,* April 1, 1990, p.15.

13. Whittier, "Medical Missions," *The Aurora* , February 1, 1900, p.3.
14. Anonymous, "The Daughter of a King," *The Aurora*, June 1, 1901, p.20.
15. K, "Providence," *The Aurora*, December 1, 1899, p.43.
16. K, "A Sabbath Morning," *The Aurora*, August, 1900, p.37.
17. K, "The Song Divine," *The Aurora*, April, 1901, p.7.
18. YZ (Chauncy Maples), "Lake Nyasa," *Nyasa News*, No1, August, 1893, p.36.
19. YZ (Chauncy Maples), "Lake Nyasa," *Nyasa News*, No2, November, 1893, p.68.
20. B, "Nyasa Winds," *Nyasa News*, No2, November 1893, p.66.
21. AF, "The Awful Y - Tribe," *Nyasa News*, No4, May 1894, p.140.
22. YZ (Chauncy Maples), "The Plaint of an African Fowl," *Nyasa News*, No4, May 1894, p.140.
23. MacClean, *African in Transformation*, pp.83-84.
24. WP Johnson, *Nyasa the Great Water*,
25. Editorial *Nyasa News*, No3, February, 1894, p.72.
26. Editorial *Nyasa News*, No3, February, 1894, p.72.
27. Editorial *Nyasa News*, No3, February, 1894, p.72.
28. Johnson, *Nyasa the Great Water*,
29. WP Johnson, *My African Reminiscenses 1875-1895*,(London: UMCA)pp.221-222.
30. Maples, *Chauncy Maples*, p.35.
31. Maples, *Chauncy Maples*, p.35.
32. MacClean, *African in Transformation*, pp.90-91.
33. Editorial *Nyasa News*, No3, February, 1894, p.72.
34. Maples, *Chauncy Maples*, p.35.
35. Donald Fraser, "Correspondence," National Archives LI 1/143, 1907 December 17, (1910 December 1)p.237.
36. Fraser, *The Autobiography of an African Retold in Biographical Form and in the Wild African Setting of the Life of Daniel Mtusu*, (London: Seeley Service & Company Ltd, 1925)p.163.