

Book review

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Robert I. Rotberg (Ed.), *Hero of the Nation. Chipembere of Malawi: an Autobiography*. Blantyre: CLAIM, 2001. 464 ISBN 99908-16-25-0, paperback.

Hero of the Nation is the autobiography of Henry Blasius Masauko Chipembere, one of the architects of Malawi's struggle for political independence. After a February 1965 abortive armed attempt to overthrow Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, then Prime Minister, with whom he and six other ministers had fallen out with in September 1964, Chipembere fled into exile in Tanzania and then the United States. It was during his exile in the United States in the 1970s that he began the autobiography. He died in 1975 before he could complete it. Professor Robert Rotberg, a renowned scholar of African nationalism and a personal friend with whom he had been working on the autobiography edited the book and wrote the introduction. The twenty-eight page (pp. 28-43) introduction puts Malawi's struggle for independence and Chipembere's place in it in a historical context, and fills some gaps in the account created by the author's death.

Chapters 1 to 4 are an account of Chipembere's ancestry, childhood and education. Born on August 30, 1930 at Kayoyo Anglican mission in what is now Ntchisi to parents tracing their ancestry to the Nyasa Province of Mozambique, he received his primary education at Malosa Central School, the first two years of secondary education at Blantyre Secondary School, and the last two at Goromonzi Secondary School in Zimbabwe before proceeding to Fort Hare University College in South Africa for university education. As a child growing up at mission stations, and as a student at Blantyre Secondary School he had observed the patronising and sometimes arrogant attitudes of whites towards Africans. It was at Goromonzi, however, that he had his first experience of overt racism when a white government official beat him for not taking off his hat in his presence (p. 105). At Fort Hare Chipembere came into contact with students from Malawi and other Southern African countries, some of whom, like Sikota Wina from Zambia and Tarcisus George Silundika from Zimbabwe, were to play important roles in nationalist politics of their countries. The racial situation in the South Africa of the 1950s strengthened Chipembere's resolve to fight against white domination in his own homeland.

Chapter 5-17 describe Chipembere's involvement in nationalist politics on his return from Fort Hare. The reader learns that although Chipembere was a graduate and should

have been appointed at the rank of Assistant District Commissioner, he was appointed at a specially created lower rank of District Assistant purely on account of his race, a slight which reinforced his determination to fight against white domination. ✓

In 1956 Chipembere was one of five Africans elected to the Legislative Council and immediately sought to use that institution as a platform to champion the twin nationalist causes of secession from the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland which had been imposed by the British government in 1953, and self-rule for Malawi. Although he had a large following within the Nyasaland African Congress and was looked up to provide leadership in the struggle against the Federation, as opposed to the older and more moderate leaders such as Manoah Chirwa, Chipembere ruled himself out on account of his youth and self-doubt about his public speaking abilities. The self-doubt about his oratory is not supported by the facts because Chipembere was known to rouse crowds to anger and riot (see, e.g., p. 361). It was this capacity to work up crowds with his speeches that made whites so fearful of him. The lack of confidence in himself led Chipembere to look for a mature, older man who would command the respect of both the old and the young. Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, a Malawian medical practitioner in London, was in his view, just the right candidate on account of his age, high learning and outspoken opposition against the federation. Although Chipembere had had first hand experience of Dr. Banda's arrogance and dictatorial tendencies when they met in London a few months before the latter's return to his motherland, he and his close friend Kanyama Chiume set in motion a campaign to build up Dr. Banda as the messiah who would return from exile abroad to liberate his motherland from colonial bondage. Dr. Banda arrived on July 6, 1958. His arrival rejuvenated the struggle against the Federation and set in motion a series of events which culminated in the declaration of a State of Emergency on March 3, 1959 and the arrest and imprisonment of the top leadership of the Nyasaland African Congress, including Chipembere.

Chipembere's narration ends with the State of Emergency. The constitutional reforms that followed and culminated in independence on July 6, 1964 are not covered. In September 1964 following disagreements over a number of policy issues, Dr. Banda dismissed six of his ministers and Chipembere resigned in sympathy. The moving speech which he made to the Legislative Assembly explaining his decision to resign is included in Chapter 18, which is a selection of speeches he made in the Assembly between 1963 and 1964. Most of the speeches sound sycophantic. One is left wondering whether this was a reflection of real devotion to Dr. Banda, or a public exercise in pandering to his well-known big ego.

Although Chipembere does not say it in the autobiography the invitation to Dr. Banda to lead the Nyasaland African Congress in the struggle against the Federation must rank as one of his greatest political mistakes. He and his close friend had created a Frankenstein monster that was later to destroy them. It is remarkable that in spite of all that Chipembere and members of his family went through after the break with Dr. Banda, there is no bitterness or hatred against him in the account. Did he really feel no bitterness, or would that have come later when he described his days as a guerrilla leader, and later an exile? The reader can only speculate.

The author's death left a number of important gaps in the autobiography, for example, the period of imprisonment 1959-60 and 1961-63; armed rebellion against Dr. Banda's government; and exile in Tanzania and the United States. A number of questions remain unanswered: did Chipembere really believe that a band of 200 poorly armed men could topple the Banda government? Did someone within the armed forces promise him support? Did he strike a deal with Dr. Banda to allow him to leave the country quietly?

History of the Nation is an important contribution to the political history of Malawi by someone who was one of the major players in the struggle against colonial rule. Young Malawians brought up on Dr. Banda's version of the struggle will have a chance to hear another side of the story where collective effort, rather than his single-handed efforts brought about Malawi's independence. Older Malawians who lived through the struggle will get some insight into the thinking of Chipembere the politician and nemesis of the colonialist.

While Kachere Publications must be commended for getting the book published in Malawi, one wishes stiffer paper had been used for the cover.

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