

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF CENSORSHIP CULTURE IN MALAWI: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the historical progression of censorship in Malawi right from the early days of missionary occupation. It shows how censorship was practiced during the colonial period and at the post independence era where it reached its peak. At this period all major works on Malawi, be on political economy, constitutional system, nationalist struggle or foreign policy were banned. The paper discusses further the events that led to the introduction of multi-party system and the formation of the new government. The changes that were brought about included greater freedom of expression and freedom of association. The author concludes that censorship is a social phenomenon which is practiced in all spheres of life. However, it is good only if properly done. Librarians should practice limited censorship on moral grounds. Finally, the paper challenges all Malawian librarians that the major task ahead of them now is to fill the gaps created by the censorship culture into their library collections.

INTRODUCTION

Culture has been defined in many ways by different authorities. However, for the purpose of this paper, the definition provided by the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, as quoted from Taylor, will suffice, "Culture or civilization, taken in its widest ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as member of the society"²

According to the *Dictionary of Social Sciences* "Censorship denotes the restriction by authority (political, religious, or other) of any expression regarded as dangerous to that it sustains. It may also denote as self-imposed restriction in conformity with a widespread public attitude or group pressure"³

In this presentation, censorship is taken in its broader spectrum. It

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² International Encyclopaedia of Social Science. Vol. 3-4. New York: Macmillan, 1968.

³ Julius Gould and William L. Kalb (ed). A Dictionary of the Social Science. London: Tavistock Publication, 1964, p.78.

encompasses political detentions, exiles, deportations, etc. These took their toll on the Malawian society, particularly during President Banda's regime.

Preliminary Remarks

Throughout history, mankind has practised censorship in the homes, societies, groups, government, etc. But, the degrees have varied. Among other things, censorship hampers development and it dictates how people in society should think. Consequently, they do not become creative, innovative or original. It is important that there exists free flow of information in society, which can be used by intellectuals and others in order to plan or visualise for a better tomorrow. Needless to say that plurality of views is a fundamental principle of democracy. The divergent views expressed should be allowed to disseminate fully with the ultimate goal of achieving economic, social, and political national development.

This paper demonstrates the historical progression of censorship in Malawi and its effects from the early days of missionary occupation in the mid-1870's, through the colonial period to the post-independence era. It is clear that censorship in Malawi had existed even during the pre-independence period, but it reached its zenith during the reign of President Banda when Malawi reached a state of being a closed society. All the fundamental principles of democracy - freedom of association, movement, expression, religion, etc - were virtually expressed as a result of the degree of censorship attained during the Banda regime. The instruments for this were regulations, bills and acts promulgated from time to time. The repressive control of political, economic and social life qualified it as a police state. In this, the suppressing documentary source of information was paramount. The press was effectively mugged by strict censorship laws and practices. Openness, as an essential condition of academic freedom, was not there.

Relationships Among the Parties in Colonial Malawi

The occupation of Malawi was pioneered by the Scottish and English missionaries towards the close of the 19th century. The Free Church or Livingstonia Mission established its permanent headquarters at Khondawe, Rumphi in the north in 1894 after an unsuccessful attempt at Cape Macleor, Mangochi (1875) and Nkhota Bay in the north (1881). The Church of Scotland or Blantyre Mission settled in what is now Malawi's leading Commercial City of Blantyre in the south (1876). The English missionaries established their Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) on Lihoma Soland in the north (1885).

The missionaries were followed by the settlers or planters, and later the colonial administrations. The planters came to settle in the Shire Highlands, mainly in the present-day districts of Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Zomba, Mulanje and Thyolo. It was only in 1891 that the British Government partly threatened by the Portuguese advances and occupation of the southern tip of Malawi, declared

a Protectorate over Malawi. It is important to stress that the aims of censorship for the successive Malawi governments were different.

On the whole, during the colonial period, 1891 - 1964, the government or state and the missionaries shared some concerns, for example with respect to the morals of the Malawian society and the development of education. The missionaries were seen as protecting the morals of the African. To that extent, they censored his culture. They condemned his/her religions beliefs, traditional dances, beer drinking, polygamy, etc. Anything that did not conform to Christianity was condemned. Moreover, some of the missionaries held the idiosyncratic view that the African culture was still growing towards the ideal one - the western culture. To others, the African was a child and, therefore, needed to be guided in his cultural values.

Many colonial administrators supported the missionaries in this respect. But, sometimes their conceptions differed, and so, they clashed. For instance, whereas the missionaries were apposed to the Islamic Religion and its spread in Malawi, the Government tried to accommodate it. The missionaries viewed Islam or Mohamedanism as a future competitor with Christianity for the supremacy amongst the local population. Similarly, although the missionaries were apposed to the *Nyau* cult of central Malawi, the Government accommodated it.

As another illustration, in a despatch to the Colonial Office (CO) in May, 1916, Governor Smith complained bitterly about the Rev. Alexander Hetherwick, Head of the Blantyre Mission and one of the leading missionaries of the time who exerted a great deal of influence on the development of the protectorate, just like his counterpart Rev. Dr. Robert Laws of the Livingstonia Mission, "Hetherwick must [not] have his finger in every pie. If he left politics alone (he is always the chief talker at the Town Council and Chamber Meetings) and attended more to his work, it would not be the disadvantage of the Church of Scotland Mission..."⁴

The Colonial government gave a great deal of moral (and not financial) support to the missionaries. Indeed, the history of the development of education in Colonial Malawi is the history of the missionaries. Although the administration was established in 1891, it was only in 1926 that an Education Department was set up. Education had been left in the hands of the missionaries with the Government paying only lip service.

Initially the relationship between the Government and the white settlers was cordial as it has been noted by Myambo, "... The planter-trader settlers demanded land- labour policies that would facilitate the profitable production of plantation

⁴ Governor Smith to Sir. George Fiddes of CO, dated 18 May, 1916, p.3. CO525/67,68 Vol.2, 1916, pp.555-557.

crops. The administration responded favourably and granted them monopoly over land and labour. Once their control over land and labour was firmly established, the settlers were free to develop their estate plantations by forced labour”⁵ Although the labour supply in the Shire Highlands was supplemented by that from Central Malawi (then called Angoniland) and the north, particularly Nkhata Bay District, more labourers poured in from Portuguese East Africa (New Mozambique) at the turn of the 19th Century. These were Nguru people fleeing from the harsh Portuguese Administration. Most of them had no land rights and, consequently, were caught in the forced labour system.

Even with respect to immigrants, the administration was in agreement with the settlers whose objective was to keep up the labour supply while maintaining low wages. But, they also clashed at other times. As Myambo notes again, “while the firms and individual employers of labour in the shire Highlands strongly disapproved of the Administration’s policy of labour export, they were perhaps more angered when, in 1904, the Administration abandoned labour recruiting assistance that they had come to enjoy. At the end of that year Sharpe publicly stated that “Natives of the Protectorate are now absolutely free in the matter of labour. They can choose their employer and go where they like to obtain worth without applying to the Government Labour Bureau”

The missionaries disapproved the *Thangata* labour system as practised by the white settlers. As for the natives, they sometimes disapproved the condemnation of some of their cultural practices by their new masters or liberators. For example, they wondered why the missionaries were condemning beer drinking when wine was being served for holy communions! Similarly, they wondered why the white man was condemning their dances when they themselves were dancing very tightly close to each other! Indeed, the formation of breakaway or separatist churches of the inter-war period and the Glulembuve Uprising of 1915 (to which reference will be made again later on) were a manifestation of such protests or clashes.

CENSORSHIP IN COLONIAL MALAWI

Some Legislations

Following its establishment, the Government made a series of legislation in the form of acts, bills, notices, and ordinances. These were necessary for the smooth administration of the Protectorate, and they covered many areas; for example, agriculture, health, education, native affairs, exhibitions, censorship, trade, and labour migration. A few examples are given below.

⁵ Simon S. Myambo, *The Shire Highlands Plantation*. Thesis (MA) - University of Malawi, 1974, p.iii.

The Customs Ordinance no. 8 of 31 Gataher, 1906 prohibited the importation of the following items, among others: indecent or obscene prints, paintings, photographs, books, cards, lithographs, or other engravings, or any other indecent or obscene articles⁶ The aim was to protect the morals of the Malawian society, but it was up to the responsible officer to determine what was indecent or obscene.

The Stage of Plays and Cinematography exhibitions ordinance no. 3 of 23 May, 1912 was not concerned with censorship as much, but rather the safety of the premises or theatres, for example prevention from fire outbreaks and the provision of water in the premises.⁷

Another example was the Witchcraft Ordinance no. 4 of 12 May 1911, which related to native affairs. This prohibited the local custom of executing justice through the administration of *nwavi* or *muabvi* or any other poison, fire, boiling water, or by any other ordeal which would likely cause harm or even death to a person.⁸ This was quite good, considering the many innocent lives that had been lost hitherto through *nwavi*, Coldham has noted with reference to commonwealth Africa, “witchcraft Ordinances were introduced, creating a number of offences carrying severe penalties, in an attempt to eradicate both belief and practice of “witchcraft.”⁹

But, sometimes it was the way these legislation were being implemented that was a problem. For example, a legislation for contour ridges and bands in order to control soil erosion and ultimately increase agricultural yields was quite good, particularly in hilly places. But, the methods employed were sometimes very harsh.

The missionaries continued with their evangelical and educational work and censored the materials for the native in the process. But, they were also guarding against other missionaries encroaching in areas of their established influence. For example, they were not happy with Joseph Booth of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society who established a number of missions in Nyasaland between 1892 and 1897.¹⁰ He preached a Millennial Daum. A wave of Ethiopianism was passing through Malawi.

⁶Laws of Nyasaland. Ordinances of the Nyasaland Protectorate in Force. Edited by Charles J. Griffin. London: Stevens, 1913, p274.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp.378 - 379.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.518.

⁹ Simon Coldham, Criminal Justice Policies in Commonwealth Africa: Trends and Prospects. *Journal of African Law*, 44 (2), 2000, p.219.

¹⁰George Shepperson and Thomas Price. *Independent African: John Chilambive and the Origins, Setting and Significance of the Nyasaland Native Rising of 1915*, Edinburgh: University Press, 19958, p. 119.

Booth clashed with both the missionaries (led by the Rev: Alexander Hetherwick of Blantyre) and the Government (Vice Consul and later Governor Sir Alfred Sharpe). He was accused of not only paying his workers three times the established rate, but also of enticing the Blantyre Mission's converts.¹¹ Matters came to a head in 1899 when he had his petition to Queen Victoria published in the local *Central African Times* of 22 July 1899.¹² Among other things, he protested against Africans being forced to fight in wars against fellow Africans; he wanted most of the revenue from hut tax to be ploughed to African education; and he wanted the protectorate to revert to native ownership after twenty-one years. Basically, his petition aimed at influencing Native Policy as to conform more with the commandments of the Bible.

As Shapperson and Price have noted, "... to Sharpe, Booth was a 'shifty, undesirable, dangerous man; to Booth, the Commissioner was a petty tyrant, ready to put an African into chains for the slightest offence.'¹³ So, his/her petition earned him/her arrest and deportation in August 1899. He fled to Portuguese East Africa and re-entered Malawi after surety of refraining from objectionable propaganda in November of the same year. But, it was his disciple Elliot Kennan Kamwana, a Tonga from northern Malawi, who was on the spot distributing Watch Tower literature and preaching. He too was deported in 1908 to South Africa.¹⁴ He returned in 1909.

It must be borne in mind that this was a very difficult and sensitive period not only for Malawi, but the mother British government as well. The government was just being established in Malawi after suppressing inter-tribal wars and the slave trade. Moreover, at the time, there was a threat of a native uprising taking advantage of the English troubles with the Boers. The loss of the Boer War, 1899 - 1902, had exposed the limitations of the British power.¹⁵

Chilembwe Uprising and Subsequent Legislations

But, all the three parties - the state, missionaries, and the white settlers - were still to clash with another disciple of Booth, John Chilembwe, whom he had baptised in 1893. Although they seemed to have parted company later on,

¹¹*Ibid.*, p.120.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁴ Briglal Pachai (ed), *The Early History of Malawi*. London: Longman, 1972, p.415. Also see Shepperson and Price, *Ibid.*, p.154.

¹⁵John Millin Selby, *The Boer War: A study in cowardice and course*. London: Arthur Barker, 1969, p.226.

Chilembwe was still in touch with his master who had greatly influenced him. With the assistance of the Baptist missionaries in America-where he was ordained - Chilembwe established the Providence Industrial Mission at Mbombwe in his home district of Chiradzulu, southern Malawi in 1900.

Chilembwe's teachings - which also bordered on Ethiopianism - and his criticism of the Government, posed a threat to all the three parties. He protested against the native hut tax, the notorious *Thangata* labour system, involvement of the Africans in a European War, the lack of African advancement, and poor educational opportunities for the natives, among other things. In short, it was a protest against the injustices of the colonial system.¹⁶ The result was the unsuccessful Chilembwe Uprising of 1915. Although unsuccessful, the blood of the martyrs was the seed of germination for future agitation.

Again, this was a very unfortunate time for both Malawi and the mother country. The First World War had broken out. Following the suppression of the uprising, the colonial government passed a number of legislations, mainly with a view to preventing the re-occurrence of such an event. With limited resources at hand, the colonial government was weak. Having been trapped between initial resistance (e.g. subjugating the slave trading chiefs like Mponda and Makanjila and their Swahili Arab allies Mulozi, Jumbe, Msalemu, and Kopa-Kopa) and the rebellions, it was very fragile. Consequently, security became its major concern. This meant the control of people's views as well, and also guarding against subversive literature.

Thus, stiffer legislations were promulgated. In 1914 the Government passed the Censorship Ordinance which was repealed in 1917. In 1921, it amended The Aliens Restrictions Ordinance in which Section 2 of the Immigration Restrictions Ordinance of 1919 was repealed and 'Former Enemy Alien' was to mean a citizen of the German Empire or of Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria or Turkey.¹⁷ Earlier on, in 1918, the Seditious Publications (Prohibition) Ordinance no. 3 came out. Under it, any person who printed or had in possession of the literature deemed seditious was guilty of an offence. Those who innocently received such literature were obliged to surrender it to the nearest police station immediately.¹⁸

Both the Government and the established missionaries were in agreement that there was need to control missionary work after the Uprising. The result

¹⁶Shepperson and Price, *Op. Cit.*, p.133.

¹⁷Nyasaland Protectorate. Ordinances of...for the year ended 31st December, 1921. Ordinance no. 12 of 1921. Zomba: Govt. Printer, 1922, p.15.

¹⁸Nyasaland Protectorate. Ordinances of...for the year ending 31st December 1918. Vol. V. Zomba: Govt. Printer, 1919, pp.5 and 7.

was the Missionary Ordinance no. 12 of 1922. However, when it came to amending the Ordinance in 1924, the Committee representing the Conference of Missionary Societies objected to some of the proposals contained in the Draft Bill. For example, it objected to the proposal that the Governor should be the one imposing limits on geographical areas within which the missions should operate. The Committee placed that in the hands of the individual missions on a voluntary agreement.¹⁹

Furthermore, the established missionaries and the Government became very hostile to the other missionaries. For example, in 1922 leaders of the WatchTower sect such as Peter Chiponda, and also Dr. Daniel S. Malikebu, who re-opened the Providence Industrial Mission in 1926, were detained and released. Malikebu was detained at Port Herald (new Nsanje). In 1925 Chiponda was removed from his home in Dowa in the Central Region and detained at Fort Johnston (New Mangochi). And, to crown it all between 1915 and 1928, the Nyasaland/CO despatches were full of correspondence relating to protests by the authorities of the Churches of Christ and Foreign Mission Committee against the expulsion of their staff Mr. G.H. Hallis and also seeking to re-establish their Mission in Nyasaland. Other missionaries, for example Germans and Roman Catholics were also screened.²⁰

The Political Removal and Detention of Natives Ordinance had been issued in 1909. Undoubtedly, it was prompted by the banishment of Kamwana. But in the 1920s the authorities were also worried with the activities of another Tonga, Clement Kadalie, who was based in South Africa. A graduate of the Livingstonia Mission, Kadalie organised the first powerful South African native trade union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union which not only almost caused a general strike, but also a Cabinet crisis in 1927. He had become the Union's General Secretary in 1921.²¹ He attempted in vain to start a native labour organization in Nyasaland. In this respect, he used Isa Lawrence, another Nyasa who was sentenced on 27 September 1926, to three years imprisonment with hard labour for importing prohibited literature.

¹⁹ Co 525/110 1924. Comments by Macllan on behalf of the Conference of Missionary Societies Committee on Governor Charles Browning's submission regarding suggestions to amend the Missionary Ordinance no. 12 of 1922.

²⁰ For example, CO525/65, vol.5, 1915, pp.170-172, 197-198, 231-241, 246 -251, CO525/71, vol.6, 1916, pp.203-210, 405-407; CO525/93, vol.6, 1920, pp.424-429, and CO525/94, vol.7, 1920, pp.278-283. What is also interesting are the protests by the Zambezi Industrial Mission and the Church of Scotland Mission against the re-establishment in Nyasaland of the Church of Christ Mission, submitted to CO by Governor Smith, CO525/91, vol. 4, 1920, pp.97-98.

²¹ Briglal Pachai, Malawi: The History of the Nation. London: Longman, 1973,p.130

The agitation created by Kadalie can best be imagined than described, particularly among the planters and the administrators. His solidarity with Chilembwe's endeavours was clear, "Yes, I [have] heard [about] that African patriot John Chilembwe and I am indeed proud of his name... Further particulars about him will be much appreciated as I would like to obtain this information for [the] future history of Africa as I believe that white men will not preserve the genuine history of the black man"²²

Libraries and Censorship

During this period, there were no libraries in the country worth talking about. There were only a few small libraries operated mainly by the missionary agents. Later, the British Council and the American (now USIS) libraries were established in 1951 and 1961, respectively.

Apart from these, there were small government libraries such as the Zomba Administration Library (1895), Zomba Agricultural Library (1899), The Forestry and Game Library (1924), the Secretariat Library (1930), the National Archives Library (1947) and the Geological Survey Library (1968) - the first subscription library in the country. Later, with the formation of the Social Club by members of the Gymkhana Club in 1918, the library came under the Club. Also, the Nyasaland Society Library (now Society of Malawi) was established in 1946. The Society is historic and scientific. School libraries worth mentioning at the time were Kachere Major Seminary (1939), Zomba Catholic Secondary School (1942), Dedza Secondary School (1951), and Blantyre Secondary School (1940).

Varley, an expert who toured Nyasaland in 1950, expressed concern at the poor state of the library affairs. He concluded that in Central Africa the half-hearted and uncoordinated library services were based on the expressed or unexpected belief that the African was not yet ready for the library as an education medium.²³ His sentiments were echoed by another expert, Johnson, ten years later who summed up the library scene in the federation as illogical and untidy.²⁴

By and large, and as has already been mentioned, the missionaries and others carried out the censorship of their library collections. They were guided by their moral judgement or Christian beliefs, in addition to the various ordinances,

²² Briglal Pachai (ed.), *Op. Cit.*, p.416. Quoting George Simeon Mwase, *Strike A Blow and Die...* (1967).

²³ D.H. Varley, *Library Service in the Rhodesias and Nyasaland: Reporting on the Existing facilities and Recommendations on Future Development*. 1951. p. 9.

²⁴ N. Johnson, *An Outline of the Public Library development in the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland*. *Library Association Record*, 63 1961, p. 370.

as illustrated above. From time to time, the government issued notices of prohibited literature. For example, the Nyasaland Government Notice No. 10 of 1956 prohibited the importation of the following materials, among others: *The Watch Tower* and *the Herald of Christ Presence*, *The Black Man*, *the Workers Herald*, *Negro World*, *Prophesy*, *His Vengeance*, *The Truth shall Make You Free*, *Year of Jehovah Witness for 1936*, *Action*, *Theocracy*, *Kenya and the Iron Heel*, *The Gold Coast Revolution*, All Publications of the *Indo -African Literary Society Ltd* and its Members, *Christendom or Christianity* - which one is "*The Light of the World?*" and all Publications of the *World Federation of Trade Unions*.²⁵

Joint Publications Bureau

Linked to the development of libraries was the publishing industry. The missionaries had also pioneered the printing press, primarily to assist with their evangelical work, including libraries. However, the uncoordinated efforts by the missionaries and the Government - through its Language Textbook Committee - bore fruits with the formation of the *Joint Publications Bureau of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland* in 1948. It had three functions: to arrange publication of books written by local authors or to meet local needs, to build up the book trade and not to compete unfairly in the trade, and to foster the growth of library services.²⁶

Nyasaland withdrew from the bureau in 1962, but enough ground for the Christian Literature Association in Malawi (CLAIM) had been laid down. Similar ground had been laid down for the Kenneth Kaunda Foundation in the then Northern Rhodesia. The Bureau's contribution lay in the development of budding authors in both countries. Through its efforts, a number of vernacular language books were published on different subjects. The International African Institute supported the Bureau's efforts, for example through literary competitions.

It must be stressed that the Bureau did not engage in censorship. It merely solicited manuscripts, and arranged them for publishing. It took advantage of the then already existing publishing houses such as Manchester University Press, Macmillan, Longmans, and the University of London Press.

²⁵Laws of Malawi. Chapter 23, p. 132.

²⁶Augustine W.C. Msiska. *The Book Trade in Malawi: a country Report*, ISBN review, 17, 1996, p.205. Quoting Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland Joint Publications Bureau. *Annual Report, 1960*. For detailed information about the Bureau, see Augustine Msiska. *The Colonies of Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland and Their Successor States: A Survey of early Efforts in Publishing and their Relationship to Literacy Programmes and the Development of Library Services up to 1970*. Thesis (FLA) - The Library Association, 1984. As for the bureau's failure to develop library services, see also Hudwell Mwacalimba, *Design for Library Human Resource Development in Zambia*. Thesis (*Ph.D.*), University of California - Betheley, 1981, p. 69.

CENSORSHIP IN INDEPENDENT MALAWI

The Cabinet Crisis

With the attainment of independence in 1964, the Government gave top priority to the rapid development of all the sectors. Admittedly, the Colonial Government had not done much. It was also argued that during the period of the Federation, 1953 - 1963, Southern Rhodesia, had the upper hand. From 1964, many social services - such as schools and dispensaries - were erected, some of them through self-help schemes which were emphasized. The University of Malawi was established in 1965 to provide the necessary qualified manpower.

But, Malawi's honeymoon was short-lived, for soon in September 1964, there was a Cabinet crisis - some ministers were sacked while others resigned in sympathy for their colleagues. While some of them fled to Tanzania, others went to Zambia and to other countries within and outside Africa. Following the crisis, a number of roadblocks were erected within the country and on the borders with Malawi. Banda's ideology was to control subversive literature emanating from the rebels outside the country, and indeed the entry of the rebels themselves as well. It cannot be gainsaid that it was largely because of that crisis that President Banda ruled Malawi with an iron hand. Indeed, Banda's Malawi witnessed the highest degree of censorship or repression. However, before delving into this, it is important to mention that apart from the University of Malawi there were also some other positive developments, and it is to these that we should now turn.

More Legislations

a) *National Archives of Malawi*

Realising the importance of preservation and conservation of the nation's cultural heritage, an Act was passed in 1964 that made it obligatory for the publisher of every book published in Malawi to deliver at his own expense a copy of the book to the Government Archivist within two months of its publication.²⁷ Linked to this one, was the Act "to provide for the classification, conservation, custody, control, acquisition and disposal of certain public, judicial, historical and general records; for the establishment of a ... to be known as the National Archives of Malawi, which shall be the official repository thereof ... for the repeal of the National Archives Act of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland."²⁸ Apart from the preservation and conservation of the nation's cultural heritage, the

²⁷ Laws of Malawi Chapter 19.01, p.2.

²⁸ The Nyasaland Archives had been a branch of the Central African Archives since 1947. It changed with the attainment of independence in 1964.

Act was also important for bibliographic control. During the Banda regime, the national Archives also acted as a repository for materials librarians considered sensitive, but not officially banned. But, one hesitated for fear of being implicated in the process. For example, one would sweat to explain to the powers how one came to possess such materials.

b) *Malawi Book Service (MBS)*

In 1964 an Act of Parliament was passed to support the country's educational sector. That was the Malawi Book Service (MBS) Act. Among its four main functions was "to serve, assist and promote the educational system and organization of Malawi by acting as a central provider of education supplies to schools and other educational establishments in Malawi."²⁹ But, being a semi-Government body, MBS made sure that no subversive or sensitive publications were being imported into Malawi.

MBS enjoyed its monopoly as supplier or distributor of educational materials until about 1995 when it wound up its business because of the losses it was making while at the same time borrowing heavily from the government. Furthermore, it could not compete in the newly introduced liberalized economic policy.

c) *Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC)*

Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) was established in 1966- actually taking over the functions of Radio Malawi Broadcasting Service.³⁰ Basically, it carried on the broadcasting services for information, education and entertainment of listeners in the country. However, in practice MBC served the interests of the Government. It went through strict control (censorship). News, whether local or foreign, as well as anything that was presented on the programmes of the Corporation was seriously scrutinised. Even entertainment for that matter. There were even cases where people found themselves into trouble because someone saw them switching off MBC in preference for BBC or some other foreign station.

Many journalists and other workers for the Corporation were fired as it happened in 1985 because they had accurately reported a speech by a Government official. Some of them were from the Malawi News Agency and the Daily Times. Three years later, Mike Hall was deported for reporting the truth about the sale of party cards. Journalism in Malawi became a hazardous business even for those resolved not to step out of the line. But also for those operating outside Malawi. In this latter respect, the deaths of Mkwapatila

²⁹ Augustine W.C. Msiska. *The Colonies of Northern Rhodesia. Op.Cit.*, p.402-403. Ordinance no. 28 of 1963 became operational on 1st April, 1964.

³⁰ Laws of Malawi. Chapter 20: 01.p.5

Mhango with his two wives and eight children in Zambia in 1989, illustrate the point.³¹

d) *National Library Service*

On 6th November, 1967 a National Library Service Act was passed which, among other things, provided not only for the control and regulation of the National Library Service, but also the establishment of its Board. The functions of the Board were “to promote, establish, equip, manage, maintain and develop libraries in Malawi.”³² That was a very important step, considering the poor state of the library service in the country, which very much lagged behind her Central African partners. The expansion of the educational sector, coupled with the war against illiteracy and raising the people’s standard of living, necessitated the support of a good library service. Indeed, by 1995, the Board was operating a total of 820 active rural and school libraries in the Northern (249), Central (292), and Southern Region (279) of the country. That was in addition to full-time service points in the major cities and towns.³³ Apart from these public libraries and others, and also those of the University of Malawi established at different stages since 1965, research, special, more government and teacher training college libraries were also established. To crown it all, the Malawi Library Association was inaugurated in 1977. One of its objectives was to encourage and develop libraries and other information centres.

But, all libraries in Malawi in the post-independence era were carefully watched by the Government and its agents, including the Censorship Board, which will be discussed later. Most of the library supplies were being received directly, and, consequently, the censoring agents sometimes came to know about what they regarded as subversive after the item was already in circulation. Then, it would be withdrawn from the shelves.

During this period, librarians and archivists operated under very difficult circumstances as partly alluded to with reference to the National Archives above. In some cases, the Government secret agents frequented their premises to check not only on subversive literature, but also on what people said. Some of them even went to the extent of registering as members under the pretext

³¹Article 19. International Centre on Censorship, World Report. International Centre on Censorship, 1991,p.29. See also Anonymous Leaflet entitled, Thoughts for New Martyrs. Index on Censorship, no.5, 1992, p.18. In March, 1979 Banda admitted that the letter bomb that injured Dr. Attati Mpakati, leader of LESOMA, was sent with his instructions (see Africa, South of the Sahara, 1999,p.657).

³² National Library Service Act no. 31 of 1967, Limited on 6th November, 1967, p. 3.

³³National Library Service Board. Annual Report for the year 1994/95. P.11 p. 8.

that they were studying with universities abroad. Apart from the radio announcements about banned publications and lists which appeared in the Government Gazette, librarians and other professionals did a lot of self-censorship, partly, to protect their own positions and lives and also their institutions. Thus, on their own initiative, they withdraw from the shelves anything they considered sensitive. The author recalls how the security forces tried to look for a justification for detaining him on 14 November, 1975 by implicating him in the newspaper cuttings he was making and keeping in his house on rural development and other subjects of his personal interest. They attempted to accuse him of sending them to rebels outside Malawi!

Other Legislations

a) Malawi Young Pioneers

These have been examples of some useful Acts, which were passed to support developmental efforts. But, there were other Acts which perhaps because of their misinterpretation, proved notorious. One of these was the Act "... to make the provision for the organization training and discipline of Malawi Young Pioneers..."³⁴ in 1965. Initially, the group was to spearhead rural development. However, it gradually came to have excessive political powers. It was clear from the Act that no one, including the Police, would question any arrests they made. Furthermore, "No Police officer may effect the arrest of a Young Pioneer without prior consultation with the person for the time being commanding the Young pioneers in the district concerned."³⁵

The Malawi Young Pioneers became very powerful and ruthless. Indeed, it can be argued convincingly that they contributed greatly to tarnishing the image of the country's only legal political party, Malawi Congress Party (MCP). At different levels, they became part of a very strong Government intelligence network. As Mapanje has noted "... These ubiquitous censors and their informers were strengthened by Banda's intelligence structure. There was the Police Intelligence, Malawi Army Intelligence, and the Malawi Young Pioneer Intelligence, each with a conspicuous array of informers."³⁶ Indeed, in the early 1970's Banda once boasted, 'We have our men everywhere.'

b) Preservation of Public Security

Linked to the foregoing, was the Preservation of Public Security Act no. 3 of 1965 which in essence was a reshaping of the Political Removal and Detention

³⁴ Laws of Malawi. Chapter 13:03, p.1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁶ Jack Mapanje, Leaving No Traces of Censure. *Index on Censorship*. No. 5, 1997, p.73.

of Natives Ordinance of 1909. This empowered the Minister responsible to detain anybody for the preservation of public order. Moreover, “any person in respect of whom a detention order has been made may be arrested without a warrant by any administrative officer, police officer or any member of the armed forces of Malawi.”³⁷ Although Mapanje has noted that banishment from one’s country is the most outrageous form of censorship second only to execution,³⁸ detention without trial too - through which he and many other Malawians, including the present writer went - is also an outrageous form of censorship.

Political detentions vary from country to country. But, there may also be variations of it in the same country. The mental torture one went through (with no literature to read), the poor hygienic conditions one was subjected to (including food), the isolation of one from his/her beloved ones, the degeneration into some kind of social pariah, the rejection by one’s own society, living in one’s own world of uncertainties and fear of the unknown, the general traumatic experience one went through, etc., all this made Malawi detention outrageous. Many a Malawian went through this gruesome or horrendous experience. The lucky ones survived, but others perished or rejoined their beloved ones mentally confused or physically incapacitated. The instructions were, “detain first, and interrogate later.” The latter hardly took place.

c) *Censorship Board*

A very powerful instrument of censorship in Malawi was the Censorship Board itself. This was especially true with reference to the suppression of academic freedom and expression, in general. It was established under the provisions of the Censorship and Control of Entertainments Act of 1968. Among other things, the Act was “... to regulate and control the making and exhibition of cinematograph pictures, the importation, production and possession of undesirable publications, pictures, statues and records, the performance or presentation of stage plays and the publications, pictures, statues and records, the performance or presentation of stage plays and the publication of entertainments, operation of theatres...”³⁹

The main function of the Board was “to consider or examine any cinematograph picture, publication, ...submitted to it for consideration or examination.”⁴⁰ It also had the mandate of enquiring into any allegations

³⁷ Laws of Malawi. Chapter 14:02, p.5.

³⁸ Mapanje, *Op. Cit.*, p.71.

³⁹ Laws of Malawi. Chapter 21:01.p.1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p.5.

regarding undesirable materials. From time to time the Government Gazette issued lists of banned materials. This had serious repercussions on the publishing industry as well as on the library services. A lot of the banned literature was destroyed and, consequently, lost forever. A lot of Malawiana that was written and published outside the country, particularly that by the so-called rebels, has been lost. This partly explains why Malawi libraries are flooded with foreign literature.

As already mentioned, creativity was suppressed. Throughout his writings, Chimombo highlights how censorship laws and practices have seriously impinged on the development of the arts and literary works in Malawi. Apart from he himself and Mapanje, some of the writers who had their works banned or blacklisted include Innocent Banda, Frank Chipasula, Dunduzu Kaluli Chisiza, Legson Kayira, Felix Munthali, Samuel Mpasu, W.N. Kanyama Chiume, Lupenga Mphande, George Simeon Mwase, David Rubadiri, Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, and Derrick Zgambo.⁴¹

Most Malawians refrained from writing for fear of reprisals, sometimes arising from misinterpretations. Travelling outside the country, whether for an academic conference or business, required clearance from the Government. Active participation during or meetings or conferences was difficult because one was being closely watched. One never trusted even his/her colleague with whom he/she attended the conference. Conducting academic research too required clearance from the Government (National Research Council).

A great deal also lay in the calibre of the members of the Censorship Board; it is on record that some of them were people of weak morals, others were illiterates, particularly those who were assisting them. Nevertheless in order to survive with their creativity, some writers tried to beat the system. For example, they would use metaphors for expressing their ideas. Others resorted to preparing two papers for conferences -the acceptable version was sent to the Board while the original was taken for presentation. They did the same even when editing literary works such as magazines.⁴² As it has already been mentioned, in order to be safe librarians and others practised self-censorship, particularly on materials not officially banned, but sensitive.

It is difficult to improve on Mapanje as he sums up the work of the censors at length, "... they censored without actually censoring;... they banned without invoking the banning order;... they censored us or our creativity by implication, by nuance, by suggestion;... they effectively let you ban yourself. Self-censorship is not an adequate concept to describe this kind of censure which

⁴¹ Steve B. Chimombo, *Detained, Exiled or Banned?* WASI. 6(3),1994,pp34-37.

⁴² Mapanje, *Op.Cit.*p76.

was too subtle and too brutal for description.”⁴³ He further goes on, “The Censors blackened out news on the radio, in newspapers, magazines and books. Banda’s agents blackened pictures, ripped out papers from books, magazines...; they cut out sections of films; tore up or confiscated people’s clothes; they searched houses; censored anything and anybody. Malawi was culturally subjugated. Soon the seven or so major cinemas in the cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe closed. To-date Malawi has no cinema...”⁴⁴

On self-censorship, another renowned Malawian poet once admitted, “the Censorship Board is well known among Malawian writers. We therefore exercised self-censorship which was terribly damaging to creative work, and we knew this, but in Malawi one knows exactly what to say. Most of my poetry at that time was very obscure, something my colleagues pointed out constantly. That was the cause of a real dilemma for me because radio required a clear, straightforward poetry: listeners don’t have the leisure for decoding a text.”⁴⁵

d) *Decency in Dress*

Another notorious Act related to the Censorship one was the decency in Dress Act no. 10 of 1973. The following year this was amended “... so as to make it an offence for male persons to wear trousers of the type known as “bell - bottoms” in public anywhere in Malawi. The Bill also makes the manufacture of the garments unlawful...”⁴⁶

While some sections of the Malawian society welcomed the Bill on moral grounds, others looked at it as an infringement on an individual’s rights. Furthermore, hippies were not allowed to enter Malawi or were deported if identified. Mini-skirts and dresses that did not cover the knees were not entertained. Ignorant visitors/tourists had to be sold *vitenjes* (pieces of cloth) at the borders or international airport. On the other hand, the locals were harassed.

e) *Some Regionalist/Tribalist Tendencies*

But censorship during the Banda era also took other forms. One of these was the establishment of the Chichewa Board in the early 70’s. Linked to this was the establishment of a Department of Chichewa and Linguistics at Chancellor

⁴³ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.78.

⁴⁵ Frank Chipasula, Dusk. Index on Censorship, no. 2, 1987, p.13.

⁴⁶ An Act to amend the Decency in Dress Act, 1974.

College of the University of Malawi in 1971. These two developments were seen as promoting the Chichewa Language of his Central Region at the expense of other local languages. As Vail and White have stated, "Malawian culture was made synonymous with Chewa culture."⁴⁷ Incidentally, both Chinyanja and Chitumbuka had been banned not only on the national radio, but also as media of instruction in primary schools. During the Malawi Congress Party Annual Convention of 1971 some northerners, including chief Katumbi of Rumphi District, were beaten up and detained for opposing the ban on Chitumbuka. Simukonda has stated openly that Banda's censorship policies were meshed with regionalist policies, again with a view to developing his home region at the expense of others. For example, an education policy was put in place to restrict access by pupils of Northern Region origin by a progressive process which combined raising selection criteria for candidates from the Northern Region. It further restricted selection to secondary schools located in the respective home regions. Later, the government introduced a district quota system based on the district's share of the national population for admission into the only National University of Malawi.⁴⁸

As if all these were not enough, on 13th February, 1989, Banda decreed that all northern teachers in the central and southern regions should go back and teach in their regions. One result of that was that some marriages broke down. Worse still, those like Thoza Khonje, who criticized the move, got detained.⁴⁹ Even the detentions of the senior academics and administrators from the University of Malawi in the mid - 1970's was tribalistic. In the words of Mapanje, it was "... larger design of cleansing the University of Malawi of academics and administrators from northern Malawi."⁵⁰ Incidentally, their kinsmen at the National Statistical Office in Zomba were also caught in the cleansing design.

THE POST BANDA ERA

The wind of change that was blowing across Europe and indeed Africa in the 1980's and the early 1990's did not spare Malawi. For the first time in thirty years or so there were street demonstrations (which had been banned) by the University of Malawi students in Blantyre and Zomba on 17th March, 1992.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Tribalism in the Political History of Malawi*. Leroy Vail (ed). *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*. London: J. Currey., 1989, p.182.

⁴⁸ Pacharo H. Simunkonda, a Base of Legitimate Corruption? The Political Economy of Malawi's Regional Equity Policy. Kwame Frimpony and Gloria Jacques (eds.), *Corruption, Democracy and Good Governance in Africa*. Gaborone: Lightbooks, 1999, pp.252-253.

⁴⁹ Article 19, *Op., Cit.*, p.29.

⁵⁰ Mapanje, *Op. Cit.*, p.77.

⁵¹ Index on Censorship, 21(6), 1992 p.38.

It has to be remembered that students throughout history have had a tendency to seek reform and/or revolutionize society and question the legitimacy of existing political and power structures.⁵² Before that, on Sunday, 8th March, 1992, the Pastoral Letter written by eight Roman Catholic bishops was read in every Catholic Church in the country. Among other things, it raised concerns of dignity and unity of humankind, church and society, aspirations to greater equality and unity, the right to an adequate education, problems of the education system, freedom of expression and association, and adequate health services.⁵³ During interrogation the bishops were repeatedly accused of sedition and threatened with death. Furthermore, on 19 March, 1992, an arson attack was reported in Balaka where the letter had been printed.

Then came the sacrifice by the trade unionist Chakufwa Chihana who braved to challenge the government openly upon his return from Johannesburg on 7th April, 1992. As he was about to deliver his prepared speech at the Lilongwe International Airport, Chihana was arrested, and later tried by court of law.⁵⁴

In short, these rapid events were a milestone in Malawi's history. Change was inevitable. The pressures exerted within and outside Malawi culminated into a National Referendum, which in turn paved the way to multi-partyism in 1994. Thanks also to international donors for exerting pressure on Malawi by suspending humanitarian aid. Both the photocopier and the fax machine played a crucial role in disseminating information during the transition period from one - to multi-party type of government. People secretly made or reproduced and distributed newsletters, letters, etc., which were advocating change, or criticising the Banda regime. Unlike the mail that was coming through the post and easily subjected to censorship or interception or the tapping of telephone conversations, the regime found it very difficult to intercept faxes. Faxes came out of the offices from within and outside, and were also reproduced and distributed secretly.

With the new Government, things are changing. There is now a great deal of freedom of expression in the country - people can write and talk about anything. Academic freedom (whether by staff or students) is being boosted. The Jehovah Witnesses who had suffered so much, including detention and exile are now worshipping freely. The notorious Malawi Young Pioneers Movement was disbanded. The Chichewa Board was dissolved while the Department of Chichewa and Linguistics at Chancellor college has changed to the Department of African languages and Linguistics. Librarians, archivists, and others in the information service are much freer in executing their duties than before.

⁵² Laksiri Fernando (and others), (eds.), academic Freedom, 1990: a Human Rights Report. Geneva: World University Service, 1990, p.5.

⁵³ *Index on Censorship*, no. 5, 1992, pp.15-17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

There is freedom of association - for example people are joining political parties of their choices. Apart from English and Chichewa, the national radio now broadcasts news in Chiyao, Chitumbuka, Chilomwe and Chitonga. The role of television in its ability to provide immediate information cannot be over-emphasized. It is a powerful media, and yet it was not permitted during the old regime. That explains why Malawi television service started only about two years ago.

There has been discussions regarding the de-banning of some literary works. Similarly, there has been discussions to review the Censorship Board and its laws. Recently, there has been talks of curbing pornographic literature which, it is being claimed, is spoiling the youth. All these are positive developments and some illustrations of the changes taking place in the post - Banda era. But, a lot remains to be done.

Apart from those who see change as coming up slowly, others, for example Chimombo, argue that there is still suppression of information, self-censorship and that the journalist is still uncertain about what he or she can say about the Government. He quotes a paper which had stated that there were orders from a highly placed government official that the national radio should play down "criticism of the government which are signs of "the making of a dictator."⁵⁵ Of course there are bound to be isolated cases. At the same time, it needs to be emphasized for a country that had suffered for thirty years, some of the changes have to come about gradually.

CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to present a historical progression of the evolution of censorship in Malawi from the early days of missionary occupation, through the colonial period, to date. In doing so, it has shown how Malawi developed into a closed society. It has demonstrated that censorship existed even during the pre-colonial period, but reached its pinnacle during the thirty years of Banda's dictatorial or autocratic rule. The ideals of democracy were completely suppressed.

A distinction has been made between the various sectors - the colonial state, missionaries, and the white settlers. Their relationships have been explained. There were continuities and discontinuities between colonial and post-colonial forms of censorship in that the ideology of control applied to both periods. However, the nature of controls somehow differed. The post - colonial state was more interested in ideological than security issues.

The instruments of censorship were legislations administered not only by law enforcing officers, but also by powerful institutions like the Censorship Board. Yet, it is clear that censorship under Banda took various forms. Apart from ripping out pages from books, blackening out news on the radio, blackening

⁵⁵ Steve Chimombo. Nothing Changed for the Writer [Opinion] *WASI*, 6(3), 1995, pp. 28-31.

pictures in magazines, cutting out sections of films, tearing up or confiscating people's clothes or property, searching houses, etc., there were also political detentions, exiles, deportations, and murders. Furthermore, it also had some regionalist/tribalist tendencies.

Every nation has or has had its own dark chapter. The organized murder of 6,000,000 Jews by Nazi Germany; Stalin's grand conspiracy of silence in Russia through show trials, purges, deportations, concentration camps, murders, etc; the indoctrination of Japanese children through censored literature with a view of letting them believe that Japanese overseas expansion was a sacred campaign to bring the whole world under one roof; the persistent social struggles that characterized and shaped American history - including the Watergate Scandal; Apartheid South Africa; and the deportation of the Ugandan Asians by Idi Amin, coupled with the burning of books in that country's libraries - all serve as living examples.

Malawi joined the bandwagon to create its own dark chapter in this respect. Among other things, the censorship and the book burning of the totalitarian regimes of the 1920's and 1930's were being repeated here. The censorship that was being practiced under Banda was a complete violation of human rights of intellectuals (students included), journalists, writers, artists, as well as other professionals, businessmen, and the ordinary people.

But, while admitting that Banda's tyranny was beyond the law and that it was allowed to transcend the boundaries of Malawi, one would agree with Zeleza that the blame cannot all be placed on Banda.⁵⁶ The civil society should also bear the blame. Experience has shown that dictators or tyrants are sometimes made by the societies in which they live.

A case in point is Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana who, although he steered his country to independence in 1957, his fellow citizens resorted to worshipping him. In the process a dictator emerged. His advisors also played a crucial role.

Along the same lines, Banda was partly transformed into a dictator. Dunduzu Chisiza had warned. "The real problem is posed by those leaders who lapse into dictatorial tendencies because their countrymen trust them... too much..."⁵⁷ Banda was given all kinds of praises - lion, liberator, even the composed songs had clear messages, for example the popular tune, *Zonse Zimene za Kamuzu Banda (Everything belongs to Kamuzu banda)*. Indeed, Mapanje is right in stating that nothing was done/achieved on your own merit or

⁵⁶Paul Zeleza, Banishing Words and Stories: Censorship in Banda's Malawi. *CODESRIA* Bulletin, no. 1., 1996, pp.10-15.

⁵⁷Dunduzu K. Chisiza. *Realities of Independence*. London: Africa Bureau, 1961., p.11. Quoted by Philip Short, Banda. London: Routledge, 1974, p. 202.

in the name of your country or your institution, but in the name of or because of Ngwazi Banda.⁵⁸

Censorship is a social phenomenon. It is part and parcel of one's life, and, therefore, cannot be eradicated. Even in our homes, there is censorship. Societies practise censorship on things which are not accepted. Ruling classes use censorship as a weapon for suppressing the intellectuals and masses, thereby ensuring their lengthy regimes. They want to protect their privileges. But, it must be remembered that the more the people are silenced, the more they are determined to talk about things. On the whole, depending upon the circumstances, unless it is used for oppression, some degree of censorship is good.

As librarians, archivists, documentalists, etc., we have an important responsibility to collect, process, preserve and disseminate information. We need to practise only limited censorship on moral grounds. We should try to be non-partisan as much as possible and perform our noble job as brokers of information for our users. We are promoters and defenders of democracy. As such, we need to join other forces - journalists, writers, artists, publishers, etc. to ensure that our hard won democracies do not backslide into dictatorship. As Barbara Maskela once put it, "We are not prepared to see culture become a case of arrested development, frozen at the point of liberation. Nor will we be content with a culture vulnerable to becoming the fiefdom of some future oppressive ruling class."⁵⁹

One major daunting task for the Malawian librarian or documentalist is to fill the gaps created by the censorship culture into the library collections. Like it has been the case with the Spanish libraries after Franco's⁶⁰ death, the Malawian librarian too is faced with the problem of identifying and quantifying Malawiana that was published or simply kept as manuscripts in exile, and also that was hidden locally.

⁵⁸Mapanje, Op. Cit., pp.74-75.

⁵⁹ Nadire Gordimer. South Africa. Censorship and the Aftermath. *Index on Censorship*. 19(7), 1990. p.16. Quoting Barbara Maskela. Secretary for culture in the African National Congress.

⁶⁰Jo Labanyi, Filling Gaps: Ten Years after Franco's Death, Spanish Libraries Still Suffer the Effects of Forty Years' Censorship. *Index on Censorship*. Vol. 6, 1985.p.26.