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Land Concentration, Institutional Control and African Agency

Growth and stagnation of European tobacco farming in Shire Highlands, c 1900 – 1940

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Land Concentration, Institutional Control and African Agency

Growth and stagnation of European tobacco farming in Shire Highlands, c 1900 – 1940

Erik Green

Abstract: The role of factor endowments and institutions as drivers of socio-economic change and development is a central theme in economic and agrarian history. The common approach is to identify either factor endowments or institutions as triggers of change. Meanwhile, institutions and factor endowments are interdependent and the puzzle is to identify the causality within the structure of interdependence. This paper is an attempt to relate factor endowments with institutions from a specific theoretical angle, following Griffin et al proposed hypothesis of the connections between land concentration and labour control. The paper discusses to what extent land concentration in the southern province of colonial Malawi during the early colonial period created specific institutions of labour control that determined agricultural growth on European controlled tobacco farms. The paper concludes that the European farmers' control of labour was severely restricted due to African farmers' (tenants as well as peasants) engagement in cash crop production. The labour contracts were therefore to a large extent designed to meet the demands of the Africans. Land concentration had little impact on European farmers' capacity to control labour. On the contrary, African agency played a significant role in shaping the institutional framework in which the European farmers operated in.

Keywords: Africa, Malawi, settler, peasant, land concentration, factor endowments, institutions

JEL classification: N17, N37, N57, N97

Introduction

The role of factor endowments and institutions as drivers of socio-economic change is a central theme in economic history (see, for example, the Brenner debate on the fall of feudalism in Europe, Aston and Philpin 1985). The common approach is to identify either factor endowments or institutions as triggers of change (Acemoglu 2001, Engerman and Sokoloff 2002, Austin 2008). The conventional view is that factor endowments, at least in pre-industrial societies, in the long-run affect the institutional structure, though the process is not straightforward due to political and cultural factors (North 1990). That is, institutions and factor endowments are interdependent and the puzzle is to identify the causality within the structure of interdependence. This paper is an attempt to relate factor endowments with institutions from a specific theoretical angle. The paper discusses to what extent land concentration in the Shire Highlands of southern Malawi (Nyasaland from here) during the early colonial period created specific institutions of labour control and to what extent this determined agricultural growth on European controlled tobacco farms. Although the focus is on the Shire Highlands (see Map 1), references will be made to European tobacco farming in the central region of Nyasaland in order to further emphasize the arguments of the paper.

European farms in Africa should not be confused with the plantation complexes in America, which produced for the world market and relied on imports of slaves (Curtin 2002). European farms in 20th century Africa were comparatively smaller, did not depend on slaves and produced for both the world and local market. In his seminal work on settler economies in Africa, Mosely (1983) defines settler colonies as settled by European landowner-producers who have a share in the government but nonetheless remain a minority of the population and who are dependent on indigenous labour (p. 5). Following this definition, Nyasaland was not an African settler colony. But the European settler farmers in the Shire Highlands played a significant role (both economically and politically) in the southern region of Nyasaland. The paper is therefore a micro-study of the relationship between settlers and African labour in the Shire Highlands and should as such not be read as an agricultural history of Nyasaland.

Map 1. HERE

The historical role of settlers in the former European colonies has recently regained attention among scholars, in large part owing to the reversal of fortune thesis of Acemoglu et al.

(2001). Acemoglu et al. claim that colonies settled by a larger number of Europeans are on average better off today in terms of income levels than those colonies where fewer Europeans settled. The European settlers demanded the establishment of colonial institutions which protected property rights and encouraged investments, i.e. institutions the authors identify as 'good' for long-term economic growth, while in non-settler colonies, so called extractive institutions were established, which hampered long term economic growth. The authors have received critique from economic historians, on both methodological and empirical grounds. For Africa, Austin (2008) argues that the authors, by compressing history, neglect the role of African agency and the dynamic of institutional change in pre-colonial and colonial Africa. They are also criticized for grouping all African colonies into the group of non-settler economies (Hopkins 2009) and for relying on population data that is far from up to date and generally of low quality (Austin 2008, Hopkins 2009). Furthermore, Bowden and Mosley argue that the European settlers were not good for economic growth and they drew on public expenses that otherwise could have been used to develop African agriculture. Such agricultural investments, they claim, have had a far stronger impact on lowering poverty rates andpromoting economic development (Bowden and Mosley 2008).

This paper does not engage directly with the debate on settlers and economic development or the quality of institutions, but raises critical questions of African agency and the compression of history. Our point of departure is the hypothesis proposed by Griffin et al, that the degree of efficiency on pre-mechanised large-scale farms is determined by the landlords' ability to control labour (2002, 2004). They argue that the level of land concentration (factor endowments) determines large landholders' capacity to indirectly control labour (institutions), which implies a direct link between land distribution and labour relations. They take a global perspective with cases from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet bloc. However, they do not directly discuss the role of land concentration and labour control in Africa. Thus there is an empirical gap to be filled.

This paper argues that the model developed by Griffin et al. - to be applied in an African context - depends on the assumption that Africans were by and large subsistence farmers who complemented their own production with day labouring on the European farms. Following that assumption the logical outcome of increased land concentration *ceteris paribus* becomes a shrinking land base for the African farmers, followed by decreased production and intensified day labouring on the European farms to compensate for loss in

production. However, this assumption does not apply in our case and secondary sources indicate that it does not for most of Africa. What Griffin et al. neglect is the role of Africans as cash crop cultivators. African farmers in sub-Saharan Africa as a whole became increasingly engaged in cash crop production in the first half of the 20th century and the Shire Highlands is no exception. This paper argues that land concentration facilitated labour control but only as long as Africans did not engage in cash crop production to a greater extent. This paper shows that the European farmers' ability to control labour in the Shire Highlands became severely restricted because of Africans' increased engagement in the production of cotton and tobacco in the 1920s and onwards, which forced the settlers to change the content of labour contracts to enable African farmers to combine cash crop production with labouring on the estates. The paper thus reveals how African agency played a significant role in shaping the institutional framework in which the European farmers operated.

The paper relies on archival sources obtained from the Public Record Office in London (PRO) and Malawi National Archives (MNA) as well as secondary sources that for their part also rely heavily on archival sources. The sources are far from perfect and the paper to a large extent depends on fragmented information, anecdotal evidence and more or less well informed guesstimates. The archival sources consist of *remnants* and *narratives*. The former consists of documents, which can be used as part of the historical process itself, like the correspondence between policy makers and those that implemented policies. Narratives, on the other hand, are accounts of the historical process, i.e. annual reports, agricultural surveys, and public speeches and so on. It is far from possible to always draw a definite line between these two types of sources. Having said that, this paper relies quite heavily on remnants, which is a weakness but nevertheless the only option due to the lack of annual data on, for example, the size of farms, labour input on the settler farms, production on African farms and so forth. Thus the findings in this paper must be treated with a great deal of caution.

Land concentration and labour control

In 2002 Griffin et al. published an article in which they argued in favour of land redistribution as an efficient tool to reduce global poverty. The article engaged in a number of classic topics in economic history and development economics, like the relationship between land size and productivity, the role of land tenure regimes for agricultural investments and the functions of

fragmented rural markets in poor countries. Their arguments are based on a neo-classical presumption, namely that 'the methods of cultivation used by small farmers more closely approximate the socially optimal methods than the capital and land intensive methods typically adopted by large landowners' (Griffin et al. 2002: 286). Rural markets are, however, fragmented and small-scale farmers and large landholders consequently respond to a different set of incentives. The former group, in general, tend to economize on capital and employ labour intensive methods as capital is scarce and labour assumed to be of abundance, cheap and mainly allocated through non-market mechanisms, i.e. family and social networks. Small-scale farmers therefore cultivate land more intensively and generate more employment per unit land (ibid.). Meanwhile, land is a scarce resource for the small-scale farmers, which means that the implicit rental rate of land is high. The large landholders face a reverse situation with land abundance and hence lower rental rates. In a context of integrated competitive markets, there would be an incentive for the large landholders to sell or lease some of their land to the small-scale farmers since the latter can obtain a relatively higher return and therefore, theoretically, are prepared to pay more for the resources (ibid. 285). In real life such transfers seldom or never occur. This puzzle is the point of departure in the hypothesis of Griffin et al..

Griffin et al. argue, in line with conventional thinking in institutional economics, that the lack of land sales can be partly explained by fragmented land markets. But they also put forward an alternative, and in the context of this paper, more interesting explanation- large landholdings give landlords monopsony powers in local labour markets. If the landlords would sell or lease part of their land to peasant farmers they would lose control over the labour market and would consequently be forced to pay higher wages or charge fixed rent tenants a lower rent. From this perspective, land concentration becomes a form of institutional control that enables landlords to ensure an adequate supply of labour without employing direct coercive measures (Griffin et al. 2002: 285-86). The argument is partly supported by a recent review of large scale agriculture in 20th century Africa. In the report, Gibbon concludes that in non-settler economies the European settlers faced comparatively higher opportunity cost of labour because of limited land alienation (2011: 31). However, Griffin et al. provide few empirical examples of land concentration and labour control. On the contrary, they explain the failure of land reforms in for example parts of the former Soviet Bloc with a number of ad hoc saviors, like involution and lack of credit (Griffin et al. 2002: 297-303).

Successful cases, like in parts of Asia, are not directly related to labour control (ibid. 303ff.). In Latin America, they argue that the outcome of land reforms was mixed, again explained by the degree of access to credit, infrastructure and so on (ibid. 295-297).

Griffin et al. have been especially criticized for being weak in their examples from Africa, and for lacking support for an inverse relationship between land sizes and productivity levels in Africa (Sender and Johnston 2004: 149). As a matter of fact, they do not discuss the role of land concentration and institutional control in the African section of the paper. Instead, they focus on a critique of land titling and privatization of land (Griffin et al. 2002: 292-95). In a response to the critique, Griffin et al. argue that lack of accurate data prevents accurate estimations to be made on land sizes and productivity levels, though the limited number of case studies directly or indirectly point in favor of their arguments (2004: 373-75). Yet, historical research on the role of the colonial state as well as European and African agriculture point in a different direction.

In the 1960s and 70s the commonly held view among scholars was that policies in settler colonies in Africa by and large aimed at ensuring the survival of the European producers, often at the expense of the productive capacities of the African cultivators (Arrighi 1967, Palmer and Parson 1977). The former claim has remained fairly indisputable while the latter, i.e. that growth of estate agriculture took place at the expense of African peasant farming, has been modified to some extent. In general terms, European farming remained fairly unchallenged in those areas of agriculture which enjoyed economies of scale, like tea in Kenya and Nyasaland. Where they lacked this comparative advantage, European producers faced competition from African small scale farmers with mixed outcomes.

A fundamental change in 20th century Africa was African farmers' increased engagement in cash crop production, in both settler and non-settler colonies. The processes were not uniform. In the most important British non-settler colonies like Nigeria, Gold Coast (Ghana), Uganda and Tanganyika (Tanzania), the expansion of African peasant cash crop production had begun in the 19th century. In several of the French colonies, like Cameroon and Chad, it was not until the last half of the 1930s that African cash cropping began to expand significantly (Austen 1987: 142). Cameroon and Chad are exceptional cases where a plantation sector operated and it used force toresist African participation in the export economy. But even in these cases the European companies were not strong enough to prevent African engagement. In British settler colonies like Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and

Kenya, the value of African exports increased throughout the colonial period, although as pointed out by Mosely, it was not a smooth trend of growth (1983: 72).

Austen claims that '[t]he major weapon employed by Europeans in this context was […] not their superior access to various forms of producer capital but rather their influence over the state' (Austen 1987: 173). The financially poor colonial authorities were often left with few alternatives than to meet the demands of the European agriculturalists, although the powers of the latter to influence the state differed to some extent amongst the colonies (Gardner 2011). The most direct way in which European settler farmers were favored by the state was through land policies. Land was divided into European and African zones. The former often consisted of the most fertile soils, while the quality of African lands could vary considerably (Austen 1987: 173).

However, the capacity of the colonial state to reinforce policies and steer the development towards the intended direction should not be exaggerated. Taxation is a fairly good proxy of state capacity. In a recent publication Frankema largely verifies that colonial states in British Africa on average were comparatively poor and lacked logistical capacity to set up an efficient taxation system. Thus, the tax base was generally low. Before the First World War, for example, the revenue per head in Australia was 162 times larger than Nyasaland (Frankema 2010: 453). There were also significant differences within the African continent. Frankema uses four state concepts: the developmental state, the benevolent state, the Night watchman state and the extractive state. He concludes that his sample of eight colonies all combined minimalist and extractive features, although to a varying degree. Nyasaland belonged to the group of countries where extraction was more profound (high taxes) and the level of revenues low. Low revenue was an outcome of relatively modest internal sources of revenue compared to, for example, the Gold Coast (Ghana) (Frankema 2011).

This is of significance for the purpose of this paper as it reveals that the colonial states in general and Nyasaland in particular could not afford to oppress possible sources of revenue, like African cash cropping. Green also shows that in the case of Nyasaland, the colonial authorities were very pragmatic and from the very beginning welcomed African cash crop production, although almost no resources were devoted to support an expansion of commercial agriculture in Native Trust Land[1] due to the lack of financial resources (2009). To conclude, although the intention of the colonial governments in cases was to support the

growth of European agriculture at the expense of African agriculture, lack of resources prevented them from taking major steps in that direction.

A further implication of the relatively weak states that are of importance for this paper, is that African farmers remained fairly independent producers. Lack of financial and administrative sources forced the colonial governments in British Africa to rely on the principles of indirect rule. It was a form of governance based on two parallel administrative systems. Urban areas and the European population were governed under direct rule, while Africans were ruled by native (today known as traditional) authorities, i.e. chiefs and village headmen. In the areas governed by Native Authorities private land tenure was prohibited. The chiefs were in charge of land distribution and every household under the Native Authority had usufruct rights to land. The system of indirect rule had two major implications. It prevented primitive accumulation within the African communities[2] and expropriation of land by the European settlers (Peters 2004: 285). In Nyasaland the system of indirect rule was first implemented in 1912, but fully developed first in 1933. However, with regard to land tenure and administrative boundaries no major change took place in the Shire Highlands from 1912 and onwards (Green 2011b). The African farmers on Native Trust Land thus remained fairly independent because of their ability to control family labour.

Settler farming in Shire Highlands

Nyasaland became a British protectorate in 1891. European settler farmers were already growing coffee on the Shire Highlands in the southern parts of the protectorate (consisting of Blantyre, Chiradzulu, Cholo (now Thyolo), Mlanje (now Mulanje) and Zomba districts), which led Harry Johnston, Nyasland's first governor, to state that the protectorate would become 'another Brazil' (Palmer 1985: 213). European missionaries and settlers had begun to grab land in the Shire Highlands in 1870. Some negotiated directly with chiefs even though previous research reveals that it is likely that the chiefs did not fully understand the implications of redistribution of land to the settlers as they had a rather vague understanding of the concept of private property rights. Some settlers also bought land from chiefs for favorable prices (Pachai 1978: 3-36).

The numbers of settlers were, however, few and Nyasaland never developed into a settler colony. In 1921 there were 399 settler farmers (with a total population of approximately

1 200 000) and by 1931 the number had decreased to 290 and in 1945 there were only 171 settler farmers left in Nyasaland (Palmer 1985: 221).[3] This, however, did not prevent the colonial authorities from arguing, at least up to the Great Depression, that the future of the colony was dependent on the expansion of European settler agriculture. In 1920, for example, the Land Officers wrote to the Director of Agriculture that Africans would never be able to produce '[…] to anything the extent that the white man raises it', a view that was supported by the Gvernor (Green 2011a).

The history of settler farming in the Shire Highlands in the first four decades of the protectorate was, more than anything else, characterized by trial and error as farmers experimented with different crops in search of sustained profitability. Coffee was the first crop that was tried on a large scale. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century coffee production collapsed as a consequence of increased Brazilian competition and problems of pests, impoverished soils and crop diseases. The settler farmers therefore moved into cotton, which also collapsed at the end of the First World War, followed by a shift on the estates toward tobacco (Palmer 1985: 218). However, just as with cotton, the European farmers' contribution to tobacco production in Nyasaland decreased throughout the 1920s as Figure 1 shows.

Fig. 1: HERE

The European settler was a stratified group. A major division was between the fairly wealthy tea growers in Thyolo and Mulanje and the financially weak and quite inexperienced tobacco farmers in the Shire Highlands. But the stratification was apparent even within the Shire Highlands. In 1920 about two-thirds of the land controlled by the Europeans was owned by five companies, while the majority of European settlers in the Shire Highlands prepared their fields in marginal areas and relied on cheaper imported seeds that were not disease resistant (Palmer 1985: 217). The Department of Agriculture regularly complained that the European farmers employed poor methods of topping, and loaded their harvest in barns with insufficient space for curing, which often led to large amounts of low quality leaves (Chirwa 1997: 270).

According to McCracken, the growth of European tobacco farming in Nyasaland took place in two main stages up to the 1940s. The first stage, prior to the 1920s, was characterized by European settler production on large-scale estates in the Shire Highlands. Table 1 shows that the Shire Highlands was the most important area for European tobacco farming, but that

its significance decreased over time, with a dramatic drop during the Great Depression. Initially, most tobacco was sold to South Africa, but in 1908 the Imperial Tobacco Company opened a factory in Limbe and from then on almost all tobacco was sold to manufacturers in Britain. Up to 1927, the land under tobacco on European estates and exports of tobacco grown under direct European supervision almost doubled. In the mid-1920s, over half a million acres of land had been alienated to the European farmers (McCracken 1985: 39). However, with increased competition from growers in Southern Rhodesia prices for tobacco collapsed in Nyasaland in 1927 and much of the crop remained unsold. The Great Depression did not ease the situation and by the mid-1930s land under tobacco on European estates had fallen to one fifth of the 1927 figure. Only 92 of the European farmers in the southern region as a whole (unfortunately, the author has not managed to find data for the Shire Highlands alone) werestill in business after the depression, compared to 229 in 1928 (McCracken 1983: 173-74).

Table 1. HERE

The decline of tobacco production on the European farms in the Shire Highlands in the early 1930s was accompanied by the rise of African fire-cured tobacco production in the central region, which marked the second stage of growth. The producers were independent African family farms and tenants who worked on settler farms in the central parts of Nyasaland. It all began when A. F. Barron and R. W Wallace, two planters from Zomba district in the Shire Highlands, obtained leasehold rights over ca. 1 000 hectares land in sparsely populated Lilongwe district in the central province in 1920. The plan was to expand their tobacco farming enterprise by employing wage labourers, but they soon found it difficult to acquire an accurate number of labourers. Instead, they began to experiment with share-cropping as they distributed seedlings to Africans on Native Trust Land in exchange for the right to purchase the Africans crop (McCracken 1983: 175).

The operations expanded rather quickly as settler farmers soon followed Barron and Wallace's example. Between 1923 and 1926 the number of Africans growing tobacco under share-cropping arrangements increased from 900 to 33 000. In 1932, there were 41 660 registered growers in the district. By 1935 70 per cent of all tobacco grown in Nyasaland came from the central region (McCracken 1985: 38). In short, the rise and decline of tobacco

farming on European settler farms showed regional differences between the southern and central region. In the former, the sector more or less collapsed during the early 1930s, while tobacco production continued to expand in the central region till the post-war period. The question is how to account for the collapse of the former. Did land concentration have an impact on the trajectory, as the hypothesis of Griffin et al. proposes?

Land concentration in the Shire Highlands

Unfortunately, there are no detailed land censuses available in the archives. Discussion about land concentration must therefore rely on scattered estimates, anecdotal evidence and proxies. In the early colonial period, settler farmers concentrated their activities in the Shire Highlands partly because these areas were more accessible by boat, the soils more fertile and, as argued by Woods, partly because of the protectorate's land policies. Three years after the establishment of the protectorate, Sir Harry Johnston, Nyasaland's first governor, ceded approximately 304 000 hectares of land in the south to white settlers (Woods 1993: 131). In 1903, about 15 per cent of all arable land in Nyasaland had been distributed to the European companies and farmers (Pachai 1973: 683). It is likely that the figure is an underestimate since it is based on land claims that were registered and, as Pachai argues, the number of registered claims were remarkably few (1973: 683). Almost all land distributed to Europeans was found in the Shire Highlands. By the end of the 19th century approximately half of the productive land had passed into the hands of white owners (Palmer 1985: 217). In places like Zomba and Mulanje districts almost half of the African population lived on European estate land by the early 20th century (Pachai 1973: 684, Woods 1993: 131-32).

As shown above, tobacco production on European farms in the Shire Highlands had already in the early 1920s shown signs of structural weaknesses as the tobacco prices declined in 1921-22 (Palmer 1985: 222). There were, according to the settlers, mainly three factors that prevented sustained growth of European agriculture, namely land rents, transportation costs and labour supplies. We will return to the question of labour later and argue that this forces us to rethink the link between land concentration and labour control.

Before the 1920s, rents had seldom been higher than 1/- per acre, but in 1920, with the tobacco boom at its peak, they were raised to a minimum of 2/- acre in the Shire Highlands. The boom soon burst and the settler farmers complained that they would not be able to

survive the high taxes (Palmer 1985: 222). High transportation costs were also an issue that had been raised by the settler farmers already in the early 20th century. Nyasaland was landlocked and the European farmers lobbied for the construction of a railway line that would connect Nyasaland with the harbor in Beira in Portuguese East Africa. To build a railway was a costly enterprise and the, even for British Africa standards, financially weak administration in Nyasaland, found it very difficult to pay for the investment (Hillbom and Green 2010: 141). One effect was comparatively high railway rates.[4]

By the 1930s an additional problem of land scarcity arose. The European agricultural settlers that came to Nyasaland, especially after the First World War, did not belong to a group of wealthy landlords. On the contrary, many of them were ex-servicemen and unlike Southern and Northern Rhodesia, the colonial authorities did not sponsor any Soldier Settler Scheme. The settlers thus had to rely on the British South Africa Company for land in the Shire Highlands or alternatively search for land in other regions (Palmer 1985: 222). The settler farmers lacked capital to invest in productivity enhancing technology, like chemical fertilizers (Woods 1993: 132). The disadvantage of tobacco production was its damaging effects on soil fertility. Thus, in order to maintain, or even increase production levels, the farmers had to open up new land and this route was closing as population densities increased.

Labour control

So far, we can conclude that land concentration in the Shire Highlands was quite high. There is also evidence of European settler farmers actively using their control over land to tie labour to their estates. In the early colonial period, the European settler farms depended mainly on tenants and day labourers. According to Mulwafu, the Africans became tenants in several ways. The most common way was that Africans who had been dispossessed of land ended up remaining on land as tenants. Others moved from African Trust Land to settle on private estates in order to generate the cash income needed to pay hut taxes (2002: 28).

The colonial authorities early on blamed the European planters for taking advantage of their control over land to access labour. This was made possible since there were no registered boundaries for existing villages, which enabled European farmers to go beyond their rights and force even ‘free’ peasants to pay labour rent. This was against the intention of the authorities. There is no data on how common the practice was, but it was obviously taken

seriously by the authorities and even caused a riot on the Shire Highlands in 1915 (Pachai 1973: 684, 687).[5] The financially and politically weak colonial administration wanted to ensure that European farmers and companies continued to settle down in Nyasaland, but at the same time prevent the influx of Europeans from creating major social disturbances in the countryside. This eventuality would be prevented by the insertion of a 'non-disturbance' clause in the title deeds or certificates of claims issued to the European landowners in 1903. The clause stated that villages and plantations were not to be disturbed without the consent of the governor (Pachai 1973: 683).

It soon became apparent to the colonial administration that many European farmers paid little or no attention to the clause. It was reported that the settlers in the Shire Highlands continued to extract rent by way of compulsory labour from the Africans residing on the estates. Already in late 1903 the colonial administration took the matter to court. The colonial authorities alleged that a European farming company in the Shire Highlands had entered into illegal land deals and had negotiated labour-tenancy arrangements which ignored the terms of the non-disturbance clause. The Judge ruled in favor of the colonial administration. He noted that the plantation owner's main concern was not to extract land rent, but to assure sufficient supplies of labour. The colonial authorities reacted by setting up a Land Commission whose findings confirmed the judge's conclusions. The commission found that the estate owners did nothing to provide their African inhabitants with sufficient land and that labour tenancy was subject to all sort of abuses. The system of forcing people to pay, either as labour rent or crop rent, was locally known as *thangata.* It implied that tenants had to work for the landlord for one month to pay off their tax and another to pay their rent – both during the crucial rainy season. The agreements were made verbally and according to Palmer, one month 'proved in practice to be somewhat [an] elastic concept' (Palmer 1986: 107). The mission that investigated the riot in 1915 reported ample evidence of abuses connected to *thangata* (ibid.). The commission recommended that the system of labour rent should be replaced by money rent (Pachai 1973: 684-85).

However, no measures were taken until the passing of the Land Ordinance of 1928. Although the Ordinance affirmed the status of Africans and their rights to land, but it was still formulated in vague and rather dubious terms. Every African residing on European land was legally given the right to a site, materials for a hut and a cultivable plot of land. The African farmer had to enter into an agreement with the landowner either to work for wages or as part

of his rent, or to cultivate his plot and sell part of the crops to the landowner. African residents were not allowed to be evicted without 6 months' notice and it was the District Board that would decide on rent and the exchange rate for the cash crops cultivated (Pachai 1973: 688).

The new Ordinance did not challenge existing labour relations or the landowners' control over labour on a fundamental level, although it decreased the landowners' ability to exploit labour with a constant threat of eviction. Yet, and as we shall see below, the Ordinance became instrumental for the Africans who, with strengthened bargaining powers affected the paths of institutional change. The Ordinance was passed just before the Great Depression hit Nyasaland with full force. The European settler farmers in the Shire Highlands suddenly found it increasingly difficult to employ labour and even buy off the crops in lieu of rent. They could no longer react to falling prices by resorting to large-scale evictions and many therefore abandoned farming. Many of the estates were, according to the Manager of the British Central African Company, 'in a state of abandonment' (cited in Chirwa 1997: 276). By 1934 Governor Sir Harold Kittermaster went even further and advised European settlers who would like to settle in Nyasaland that they '[…] should make no attempt to take up farming on a serious scale' (Palmer 1985: 224).

In sum, it looks like the European farmers took advantage of the relatively high land concentration in the Shire Highlands and used coercive methods to assure access to an adequate number of labourers. However, by the late 1920s the strategy was either no longer possible to pursue or not efficient enough to enable settler farmers to survive the economic hardships following the Great Depression.

So far, it thus seems like Griffin et al. to some extent have identified a relevant connection between land and labour. Land concentration enabled the settlers to access labour. McCracken, writing about the Nyasaland case 20 years before the publication of the paper by Griffin et al., comes to a strikingly similar conclusion. In short, McCracken argues that the European farmers in the south, due to land concentration, were able to force Africans to pay labour rent, while the settler farmers in the central region, where much less land had been alienated, lacked the same capacity to use force (McCracken 1985: 39). However, and as we shall discuss below, there are a number of facts that suggest that European farmers, independently of levels of land concentration, lacked the capacity to control local labour.

Origins of labour

Land concentration in the south seems to have partly enabled farmers to control local labour without employing direct coercive measures. However, the role of land concentration to control local labour in the south should not be exaggerated. It neglects the fact that European farmers became increasingly dependent on migrants stemming mainly from Portuguese East Africa.

Migration from Portuguese East Africa into the southern region of Nyasaland took off in the late 19th century. In the beginning a typical migrant was a male who came and searched for seasonal employment on the estates. However, by the early 20th century more and more families came with the aim of settling down permanently in Nyasaland. The number of migrants who settled in the Shire Highlands and Lower Shire Valley continued to increase throughout the first half of the 20th century as Table 2 indicates. The immigrants were allowed to settle on estate land and were given a tax certificate in exchange for two month's labour (Chirwa 1994: 538). The European farmers thus directly gained from a constant influx of immigrants to the district. In 1924, the East Africa Commission reported that: In many parts of the Southern Province the chief source of labour is Portuguese East Africa, whence thousands of natives immigrate yearly to work on the … plantations in Nyasaland … (quoted in Chirwa 1994: 525). Not all immigrants settled on estate land. On the contrary, it looks like many of them preferred to move to Native Trust Land, where they were often allowed to settle in exchange for producing cotton for the indigenous chief or village headman, a practice locally known as *ganyo* (from the Portuguese word *ganho* meaning bonus) (Chirwa 1994: 536). Yet, high population densities on Native Trust Land forced a larger number of immigrants to settle down on estate land, even in cases when that might not have been the preferred choice.

Fig 2. HERE

In the labour census report of 1925 the importance of immigrant labour for the European settler farms in the Shire Highlands was underscored even further. It was stated that if immigration from Portuguese East Africa where to be cut off, the effect would be that '[…] half of the plantations in the Mlanje, Cholo and Lower Shire districts would have to be closed' (quoted in Chirwa 1994: 525). We do not have figures for the tobacco farms but data on the origins of labour on the tea estates in the Shire Highlands show that migrant labour

played a significant role. In 1941 it was estimated that 47 per cent of the workers on tea estates came from local nearby villages, while 27 per cent consisted of migrants from other regions of Nyasaland and a further 25 per cent were seasonal migrants from Portuguese East Africa (Palmer 1986: 108). More than 50 per cent of the labour force thus stemmed from migrants from other districts in Nyasaland or Portuguese East Africa. This is further supported by data for Thyolo district in the Shire Highlands where it was estimated that about 60 per cent of the total labour force on the European farms came from outside the district in 1939.[6] Tenancy played a more prominent role on European tobacco farms than on the tea estates more (Palmer 1986: 110). Yet, there is no accurate data on the origins of the tenants, although the scattered evidence outlined above makes it plausible to assume that migrants played a significant role. For example, in a report on labour conditions on five tobacco estates on Mlanje in the Shire Highlands it was concluded that only 10 percent of the total labour force consisted of local labour, while 75 per cent were immigrants from Portuguese East Africa (Vaughan and Chipande 1986: 12).Land concentration thus helped landlords to access African labour, but it is not the full explanation since the landlords depended on a constant influx of migrants. Land concentration facilitated European settlers' control of immigrant labour but not necessarily local labour.

African cash cropping and institutional control

A fundamental problem with Griffin et al.'s hypothesis is that it is dependant on a rather static definition of Africans as first and foremost subsistence farmers. This description fits less well with the economic-history of the first half of the 20th century Sub-Saharan Africa in general. Evidence of growth of African cash crop production on a national level does not clash with the hypothesis of Griffin et al.. It is perfectly reasonable to argue that European and African agriculture can grow side by side, but in different sub-national regions. The Nyasaland case, however, indicates that growth of African cash crop production occurred within the settler region, i.e. in the Shire Highlands and that there was a conflict between African's engagement in the cultivation of export crops on the one hand, and the European settlers demand for local labour on the other hand. Although the European farmers were a stratified group with different political and economic interests, they spoke with one voice when it came to issues of

labour supplies (Palmer 1985: 215). In the struggle over local labour the European farms were, however, far from strong enough to ignore the demands of the Africans.

By 1937 it was calculated that about 178 000 African households in Nyasaland were dependant on cash crops as their major source of income, which accounted for about 30 percent of the African population, and is about the same amount as the number of households that depended on wage laboring on the European farms.[7] In 1934 it was concluded that '[…] the government must make it clear for the Native Authorities that they want to see the acreage under economic crops to increase.'[8] At a conference of colonial directors of agriculture it was stated with regard to Nyasaland that '[b]ut the latter fact – native peasants farming under close European supervision, is a characteristic that seem exclusive to Nyasaland'.[9]

Cotton was the most important cash crop for the African farmers in southern Nyasaland, while tobacco was the most important cash crop for African farmers in the Shire Highlands. Africans in the Shire Highlands had grown tobacco, although on a modest scale, for local use and export prior to the arrivals of the Europeans. In 1900 it was concluded in the Report by the Commissioner of Trade and General Conditions of the British Central Africa Protectorate that '[t]he natives used to grow a considerable amount of tobacco, which was occasionally exported to the coast towns, but this export has fallen off of late years.' (cited in Haviland 1955: 141). Most of the tobacco was grown in the Blantyre and Zomba districts in the Shire Highlands (ibid.: 144).

A contributing factor to the expansion of tobacco production in the Shire Highlands was the African growers' mastery of dark fired tobacco, which grew well in the marginal areas (Chirwa 1997: 271). Much of the expansion of African tobacco after the mid1920s took place in the central region, but Africans in the Shire Highlands continued to grow tobacco throughout the period. The value of tobacco production among Africans in the Shire Highlands also continued to increase. For example, in the Zomba district the value increased from £3388 to £5516 between 1926 and 1929. The Department of Agriculture claimed that the number of Africans growing tobacco continued to 'increase rapidly' and the producers in the Shire Highlands still made the largest contribution up until 1927 (ibid.: 271).[10] Tobacco was grown as a complementary source of income. Vaughan has argued that the level of stratification among African rural households in the Shire Highlands was significant. According to Vaughan, the crucial difference was theat extent to which African farmers could control family labour. Tenants, who had to pay labour rent, were the least prosperous while

the farming households that only engaged in commercial farming were the wealthiest (1982: 360ff).[11] Farmers on the Shire Highlands benefited from relatively stable rainfall and fertile land. However, land was becoming scarce in the 1920s limiting the possibility of expanding tobacco production, tobacco being a land extensive crop. The majority of farmers thus seemed to have combined cash crop production with wage labouring (Vaughan 1982, Green 2008).

In the late 1930s theTobacco Commission was set up to investigate African tobacco production in Nyasaland. The report concluded that the average tobacco garden in the southern region was half an acre and that the grower had to invest an average of 326 working hours annually to grow half an acre of tobacco. (Haviland 1955: 150). Haviland claims that the figures of labour requirements are most likely underestimates.[12]

More important than the average working hours though were the annual fluctuations in the demand for labour. African farmers were most likely reluctant to seek temporary employment on the European estates if it threatened their own production of both food and/or cash crops. The annual fluctuations of labour demands on the African farms created a dilemma for the European farmers. Chirwa summarizes the dilemma with reference to the European tobacco and cotton growers in the southern region as, '[l]abor was plentiful during the dry season (March to November) and scarce during the wet season (December to February) when planters needed it most.' (Chirwa 1997: 266).

Chirwa estimates that an African farmer growing tobacco on fertile land could earn around 10-12 pounds annually, while farmers with access to less fertile land could earn between 1 to 4 pounds annually (ibid.: 271-272).[13] The former was more than twice the annual wage of an ordinary estate labourer while the latter was just above the average wage. Thus there were limited incentives for Africans to choose farm laboring before cash cropping. This was also noticed on the European farms. In the first two decades of the 20th century, the main concern regarding labour supplies, as expressed by the European farmers, was that they faced competition for African labour from the colonial authorities as well as agencies working for the white farmers in Southern Rhodesia and South Africa (Vail 1975: 90). However, by the 1920s a new competing interest had emerged, namely the African farmers themselves, who increasingly began to invest in cash-crop production rather than provide their man power to the estates (ibid.). It was not only the settler farmers that were affected. By the late 1920s the Public Works department also seemed to face shortages of labour to such an extent that the governor wrote and complained to the Colonial Office in London.[14] Africans' engagement

in cash crop production thus had significant impact on European farmers' possibility to control local labour.

To ensure adequate supplies of labour, white farmers had to reform labour contracts to allow for Africans to combine day labouring with cash crop production. Evidence also suggests that the European farms were forced to adjust to African demands rather than the other way around. There are two significant factors that point in that direction, namely the transition from tenant farming to share-cropping on the tobacco estates and the quite flexible labour contracts for day labourers. Let us start with the former.

During, or shortly after the Great Depression, the largest landholders reduced their rent requirements to between two and six shillings, while the smaller estates found it increasingly difficult to collect labour rent in the 1930s. The full quota of work was therefore seldom demanded and attempts to enforce rent requirement resulted in tenants quitting the estates (Chirwa 1997: 276). They were obviously in need of some kind of rent in order to survive. The situation had become desperate and therefore there was a relatively rapid shift from labour tenancy to share-cropping in the Shire Highlands in the late 1920s (ibid.: 272). Although the Native on Private Estate Ordinance of 1928 did not have any major impact on the relations between the tenants and the landlords (see above), it surely facilitated the transition towards sharecropping. The ordinance provided three types of African occupancy on the estates. The first category – 'natives under special agreement' – concerned Africans who had entered into a written contract for a period of no more than six months per year. The second – 'exempted natives' included servants and seasonal immigrant workers, and the third – 'resident natives' – was meant for Africans who lived permanently on the estates. It was the last category that allowed for increased use of sharecropping arrangements. Under the ordinance 'resident natives' had to be offered work at the usual market rate or be given facilities to grow cash crops, the sale of which would entitle them to a partial or complete rebate of their rent. The amount of rent and the rebate were fixed by the District Rent Board and approved by the governor annually (ibid.: 273).

The Ordinance enabled the African residents on estate land to change their status from time to time. It facilitated the shift from tenant production to sharecropping, a necessary step, as an increasing number of farmers failed or refused to pay rent (Chirwa 1997: 266). Chirwa claims that by the 1930s '[…] almost all the tobacco and cotton estates in the Shire Highlands relied on share-cropping' (ibid. 265).

The shift from labour tenancy to share-cropping did not, however, solve the problem of accessing local day labourers. For this purpose the intensified use of a 'ticket-system' was instrumental. It was most commonly employed on the tea estates, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it became increasingly important on the European tobacco farms in the 1930s.[15] The ticket system implied that labourers were not paid per month but after the completion of twenty six working days. Officially, a worker had to complete this within 7 weeks, but it was not uncommon that the period would extend to three months or even longer (Palmer 1986: 109). The Labour Department claimed that the system:

> '[…] suits the local labourer and it suits many planters as it enables them to employ natives who would otherwise not be available for work on the plantations; without it the labour shortage at the most critical time of the year would be greatly accentuated.' (cited in Palmer 1986: 109).

It is likely that the benefits to the European farmers were overestimated; the labour contracts were designed to meet the demands of the Africans. That is, African agency played a significant role in shaping the institutional framework in which the European farmers operated.

African agency and the decline of European tobacco farming

The evidence above indicates that European tobacco farmers in the Shire Highlands were capable of controlling local labour up to the 1920s and that land concentration certainly played a role in facilitating the white farmers' capacity to control labour. At the same time, this capacity was reduced in the 1920s and onwards, and after the Great Depression the capacity to control local labour had been severely limited. In 1930 the District Commissioner of Thyolo district concluded that labour must come from outside the Shire Highlands in order for the European farmers to survive.[16] Alternatively, the settler farmers could reform labour contracts in order to make it easier for African farmers to combine labouring with cash crop production. They did both. The institutional changes cannot be explained by decreasing levels of land concentration since no significant redistribution of land took place during the period. Instead, the major change was the African farmers' increased engagement in cash crop production. This strengthened their autonomy and bargaining powers.

Although share-cropping and the ticket system had advantages for the European farmers, they were also associated with a number of disadvantages and they did not really solve the issue of controlling labour. The obvious advantage for the European farmer was that they enabled him to maximize the use of land and at the same time reduce production costs (Chirwa 1997: 273-7 4). But there are indicators that share-cropping was introduced reluctantly. A major concern for the European settler farmers was that the introduction of share-cropping was followed by a loss in their control over the marketing process. Anecdotal evidence shows that African farmers, on both Native and Estate Land, employed a number of different measures to be able to sell their produce to whoever they liked. The European landlords seldom approved when their share-croppers sold to local buyers, but there was little they could do, even though some of them claimed that the system would drive the tobacco estates 'out of business'.[17] If the farmer was evicted he could always go to a new estate since the European farmers were eager to employ share-croppers (Chirwa 1997: 276-277). The Manager of the British Central African Company concluded in 1932 that Nyasaland was 'the Garden of Eden for natives' (cited ibid: 265). This is, of course, an exaggeration, but it points to the relative strength and importance of African farmers as cash croppers in Nyasaland.

The intensified use of the ticket system was also clearly a sign of the European farmers' reduced capacity to control labour. For the African farmers the system was clearly advantageous as it increased their control over their own labour. Despite their obligation to finish work within seven weeks farmers often stretched the period to three months or more. The labour department even stated that the African work force 'comes and goes when it likes' (quoted in Palmer 1986: 109). This implied that the European farmers often felt obliged to sign onto their labour rolls a far greater number of workers than they actually needed. It was estimated that roughly about 30 to 40 percent of the number of people on the rolls actually showed up at work (ibid. 1986: 109). Again, it was not only the settler farmers that were affected. In 1930 the governor wrote to the Colonial Office regarding Public Works labourers, that

> 'Under normal conditions the labourers bolt in this country is soon short. If he works at full pitch, three or four hours are the limit of his effective day's work. Sub-consciously he adapted to his work output of labour so that it will be spread over the time he is called upon to work.'[18]

What we witness is a reversal of the power balance as African farmers became increasingly influential and, following the Great Depression, managed to have a lasting impact on the trajectories of institutional changes. It was noticed in several different ways and in the 1930s it became common, leading to critical remarks on African labour in the official colonial report. In 1940, the District Commissioner of Thyolo district, with reference to tenant and day labourers on the estates, concluded, '[r]esident natives are troublesome. They sign contracts but do often not complete work'.[19]

Concluding discussions

The Great Depression led to a dramatic decline of European tobacco production in the Shire Highlands. The depression did not cause the fall in production, but rather spurred an already ongoing process of decline. This paper argues that African agency played a significant role in this process. The level of land concentration enabled the European farmers to exploit local labour, as proposed by the hypothesis of Griffin et al., in the early colonial period. But the European farmers' control over local labour was reduced as local Africans became increasingly engaged in cash crop production. By the mid-1930s the already financially constrained European settler farmers lacked the means to efficiently control labour and could therefore hardly survive as tobacco growers. We have seen that one needs to take African agency into consideration when analyzing trajectories of rural change in colonial Africa. Static concepts like subsistence family farms tend to confound rather than explain the dynamics of African economic history. What was true in 1910 did not hold twenty years later. The major problem with the analysis of Griffin et al., despite all its thought provoking and informed ideas, is that they try to explain history without a proper investigation of the processes of change. In that sense they do compress history.

Acknowledging that neither the settlers nor the African communities were homogenous the findings in this paper makes it plausible to argue that the Shire Highlands case consisted of two economic systems that were interdependent. Both the European and African farms were pre-mechanised labour intensive systems that faced relative scarcity of capital. Possibilities to generate a surplus did,in both systems depend on control of labour. The significant difference between the two systems was not only land size, but that the settlers

solely depended upon tenants and wage labour, while the African farmers could mobilise family labour and social networks and complement these with wage labour.

The level of land concentration did play a role in the struggle over labour, but capital was equally important. African farmers' engagement in tobacco production implied a more productive use of their labour and hence a possibility to decrease their dependency on the labour market. The administrative system of indirect rule made Africans' control over family labour relatively strong and enabled them to take advantage of the opportunities that came with tobacco production by reallocating labour away from the labour market towards farming.

African farmers' increased engagement in cash crop production should not automatically be portrayed as a success story. To highlight African agency is not to claim that African agriculture was a success. It does not prove that African small-scale farms are the 'socially optimal' form of production. Such claim is partly a-historical and neglects the level of exploitation of labour within the family as well as the question of involution. What is important is that one must go beyond the characterization of African farming systems as either large or small-scale. A sole focus on landholdings sizes does not help us to identify the mechanisms of change. Land must be linked to both labour and capital and in the context of the Shire Highlands, the systems of control and the relations of labour on European and African farms are of significant importance.

What then are the lessons for global history? The most obvious lesson is, of course, that one can develop the analytical tools by comparing different regions and contexts. For example, rural labour history in Africa has a lot to learn by catching up with the debates about labour in the South Asian contexts (van Schendel 2006). There are good reasons to believe that a comparison between Africa, Asia and Latin America is of more relevance than for example, a comparison between Africa and Europe. Following Diamond (1997), shared latitudes for the non-European continents must matter for the history of both agriculture and disease. Furthermore, both Asia and Latin America share a history of being ruled by a foreign minority. However, the methods used by Griffin et al. in analyzing the role of land concentration is perhaps not the best practice for global history. I believe, inspired by Austin (2007) (who himself is inspired by Pommeranz), that the methodological core of global history must be reciprocal comparison. That is, to treat both cases as deviant when seen through the expectations of the other. The advantage of such an approach is that one does not need to reject metanarratives by treating each continental, regional or sub-regional location as

a specific case that can only be explained by a specific set of analytical tools. On the contrary, reciprocal comparison enables a more thorough examination of the metanarrative when compared with different contexts.

The roles of land concentration and labour control in the Shire Highlands could inspire scholars dealing with pre-capitalist large scale agriculture in all parts of the world. But there are a number of crucial contextual factors that must be taken into account. European settler farmers in the Shire Highlands were relatively financially weak, they controlled comparatively small landholdings and operated in an environment of a financially weak state, with high transportation costs and a very small domestic market. The African farmers operated in the very same context but were relatively independent as producers due to the principles of indirect rule. What would have been the developments if European farming was dominated by large international enterprises or if Nyasaland had been under direct rule? These are important questions that can only be tackled through reciprocal comparison.

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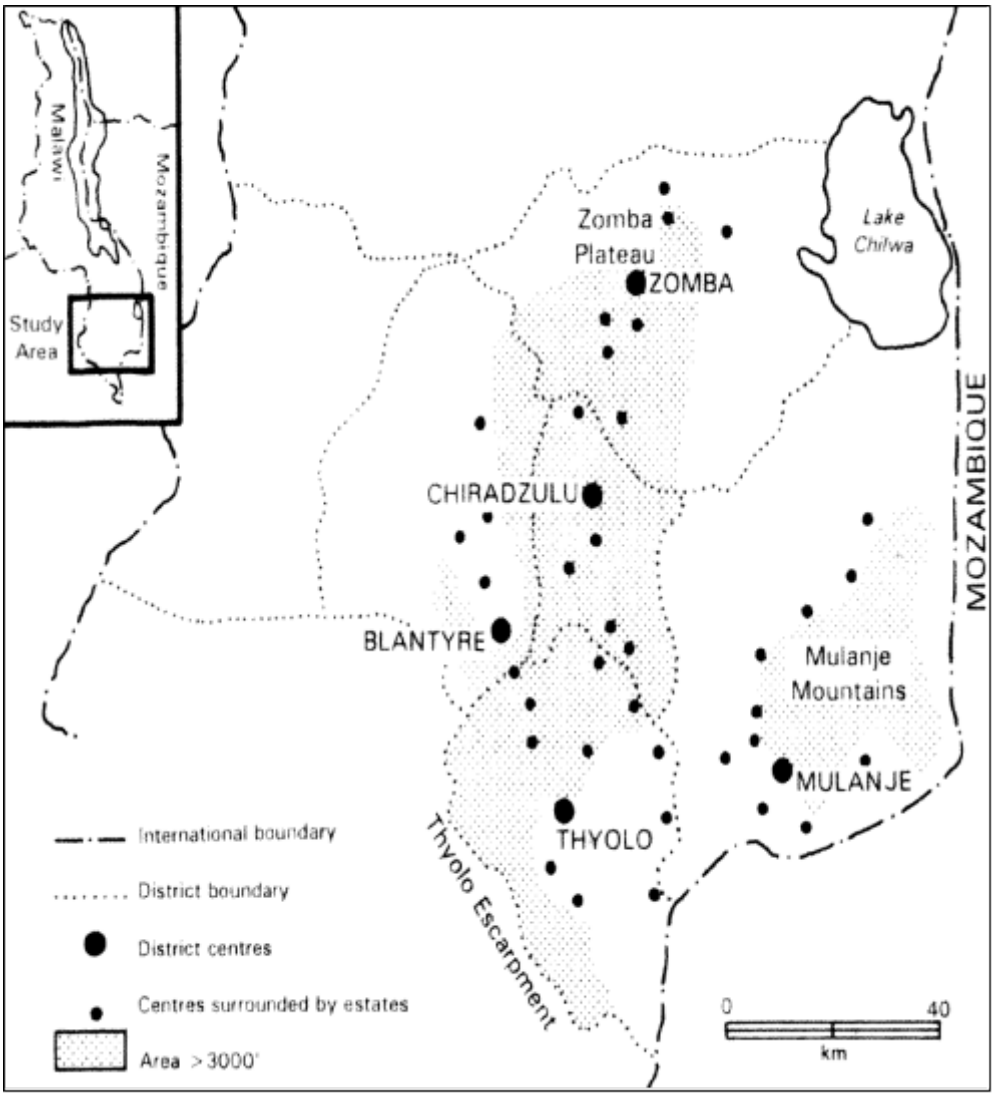
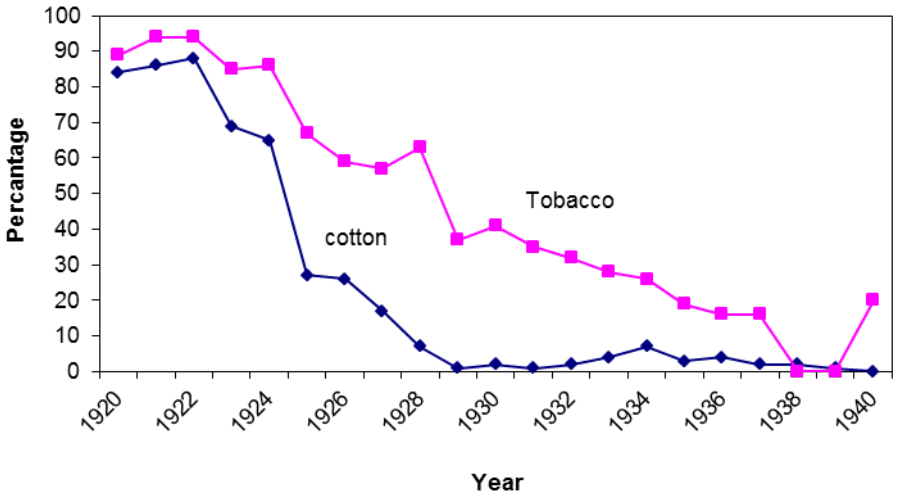
Appendix: Maps, tables and figures



Map 1. The Shire Highlands

Source: Chirwa 1997: 266

Fig. 1: Percentage of total cotton and tobacco production in Nyasaland 1915-1941, produced by white farmers



Source: Green (2007: 123).

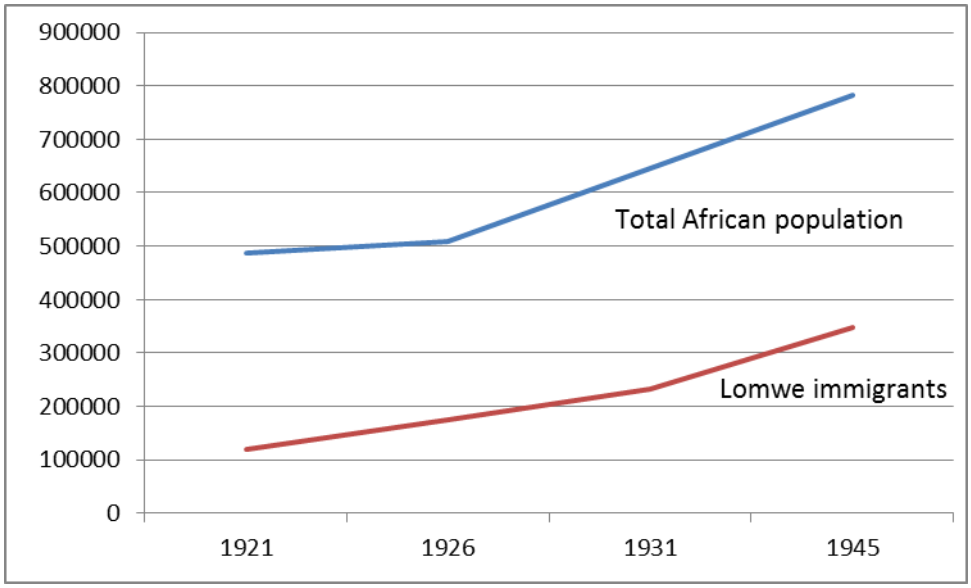
Table 1. European tobacco production, Shire Highlands 1923-1936

Year	Acreage	% of total	Production (tons)	% of total
1923	17 308	87	1 499	86
1924	16 760	81	2 633	81
1925	17 169	77	1 805	75
1926	18 346	80	2 193	76
1927	18 880	76	3 576	76
1928	16 365	73	2 996	74
1929	13 577	70	1 461	64
1930	12 107	69	1 951	67
1931	8 406	62	1 096	59
1933	4 507	57	909	58
1934	4 295	51	938	54
1935	3 609	59	524	56
1936	4 369	59	702	59

Notes: (i) Per cent of total refers to the share of tobacco grown in Shire Highlands in relation to total production on European farms in Nyasaland.

Source: Chirwa (1997: 270)

Fig 2. The Lomwe and indigenous population in Shire Highlands and Lower Shire Valley, 1921-1945



Source: Chirwa 1994: 542

Endnotes

[1] Native Trust Land refers to land '[…] held in trust for natives by the Governor who will administer it for their benefit.' MNA (Malawi National Archives), NNM 1/10/9 Nyasaland Protectorate (Native Trust Land) order in council, 1936

[2] Power has in the case of Nyasaland argued that indirect rule aimed to 'thwart class formation' and leave the 'petit bourgeoisie in the political wilderness' (1993: 317).

[3] MNA Malawi Population Census, National Statistical Office of Malawi, Public Library

[4] In the 1930s the rate for tobacco from the auctions in Limbe in southern Nyasaland to Beira was 0.97 per lb, as compared to 0.17 per lb. for Southern Rhodesia tobacco travelling a similar distance from Salisbury to Beira (Palmer 1985: 230).

[5] In 1915, John Chilembwe, an American trained priest, led an uprising against *thangata* and abuse of labour in Chiradzulu district in the Shire Highlands (Chirwa 1997: 267).

[6] PRO (Public Record Office) CO (Colonial Office) 525/182/44176 Nyasaland Protectorate Annual Report on Native Affairs, 1939

[7] MNA *Malawi Population Census 1966*, National Statistical Office, Government of Malawi, Public Records, PRO CO 525/182/44176 Nyasaland Protectorate Annual Report on Native Affairs, 1937

[8] MNA S1/411C733 Circular 15, Production of Native Economic Crops, 1934

[9] MNA 51/1058/30 Conference of Colonial Directors of Agriculture 1931

[10] MNA PCS2/2/4 Department of Agriculture annual reports, 1926-1930

[11] Lack of quantitative data makes it impossible to assess the level of stratification. However, Vaughan argues that evidence of recurrent minor famines runs by side with evidence for the survival of a surplus producing section of the African farming community. That control of family labour was crucial is indicated by the extensive trade of labour certificates between tenants and the farmers on Natuve Trust Land (Vaughan 1982: 359).

[12] His argument is based on the commission author's corresponding figures in Northern Rhodesia (1,600 working hours annually) and South Africa (1,550 hours annually).

[13] Chirwa does unfortunately not specify land sizes or labour input, neither does he provide any references to the estimates. However, his calculations are partly supported by findings from Thyolo district, (Green 2008).

[14] PRO CO 525/132/33326 Despatch from the governor to the secretary for colonies, 29th July 1929

[15] MNA PCS2/2/4 Department of Agriculture annual reports, 1931, 1934

[16] MNA S11/3/1/11 Cholo district annual report, 1930

[17] PRO CO 525/182/44176 Report on the Native Welfare Committee, 1938

[18] PRO CO 525/137/33397 Despatch from the governor to Colonial Office, 19 April 1930

[19] MNA S11/3/1/10 Cholo district annual report, 1940