

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chilembwe in Trafalgar Square – an appraisal¹

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Abstract

In September 2022 Samson Kambalu attracted international attention when his 5.5 metre statue of John Chilembwe, who led a brief, bloody and ultimately unsuccessful revolt against British colonial rule in Nyasaland in 1915, was displayed on the fourth plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. This impressive statue towers above an accompanying statue of British missionary, the Rev. John Chorley, who was then Chilembwe's only known white friend and confidant. The reason for their disparate heights is stated to be an indicator of their respective relevance and locus each to the other in Malawi's rich history. The artistic merit of the statues is unquestioned. Unfortunately, an apparent lack of rigour in providing historical context to the statues may have unwittingly detracted from the already well known, powerful and compelling story of John Chilembwe. This article seeks to redress the balance in terms of historical accuracy and provide timely context to Chilembwe's aspirations, tribulations and untimely death at the hands of African police.

Résumé

En septembre 2022, Samson Kambalu a attiré l'attention internationale lorsque sa statue de 5,50 m de John Chilembwe, qui mena en 1915 dans le Nyasaland une brève révolte sanglante infructueuse contre le régime colonial britannique, fut érigée sur le quatrième piédestal de la place Trafalgar de Londres. Cette impressionnante statue domine une statue attenante du Rev. John Chorley, le missionnaire britannique qui était le seul ami et confidant blanc alors connu de Chilembwe. La différence de hauteur de ces statues est censée indiquer l'importance et la place respectives et relatives que l'un et l'autre occupent dans la riche histoire du Malawi. Le mérite artistique de ces statues est incontestable. Malheureusement, un manque apparent de rigueur dans l'exposé du contexte historique des statues peut avoir involontairement déprécié l'histoire bien connue, puissante et irréfutable de John Chilembwe. Cet article cherche à rétablir l'équilibre en termes d'exactitude historique et à fournir un contexte opportun aux aspirations, aux tribulations et au décès prématuré de Chilembwe aux mains de la police africaine.

I was introduced to Samson Kambalu's work in April 2021 following contact by the curator at Modern Art Oxford, who was in the process of mounting an exhibition of Associate Professor Kambalu's works. The exhibition was to be called 'Samson

¹ This article is an expanded adaptation of a brief, reactive article (Stuart-Mogg 2022).



Figure 1. 'Antelope', John Chilembwe.²

Kambalu: *New Liberia*' and would include Kambalu's impressive resin, steel, and bronze-powder effigies of John Chilembwe and John Chorley. During preparatory research, the curator had seen original photographs from my collection (Phiri 1999) depicting the destruction of John Chilembwe's church after his ill-fated 1915 rising against the British colonial regime in Nyasaland, today's Malawi.

I readily acceded to the request that selected photos be enlarged to wall size to assist and inform exhibition context. It was this 2021 Oxford exhibition which provided the platform from which these imaginative statues were identified as candidates to compete for display on the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in London. Following a vote by some 17,500 members of the public, they were shortlisted by London's Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group and then selected to be exhibited for an approximate two-year period, commencing September 2022.

'Antelope' (Figure 1), the title of Samson Kambalu's poignant exhibit, is an English translation of the Malawian word *chilembwe*, the given (not family) name of the African Baptist Minister, Pastor John Nkologo Chilembwe, whose tall, 5.5-metre statue dominates the plinth.

It is likely not the first time 'Chilembwe' visited Trafalgar Square. It is almost certain that the living John Chilembwe would have travelled through Trafalgar Square on at least two occasions. On 29 December 1910, John Chilembwe wrote:

² All illustrations are from the author's collection.



Figure 2. John Chilembwe and John Chorley on the steps of Chilembwe's church on the day of its inauguration, 24 January 1914.

In 1896 I was inspired to visit a big city, London, and from there I went on in [sic] U.S. America where I finished my schooling. I was ordained as a minister of the Gospel, and in [sic] my return I visited London again, and by the kindness of the late Sir B. Gordon, [sic] M.P., and the factors of Z.I.M. [Zambezi Industrial Mission] I was allowed to visit the House of Commons or Parliament.³

Sculptor Samson Kambalu has admirably succeeded in capturing a likeness of his subject, unmatched to date. His inspiration was a photograph of John Chilembwe and John Chorley, the latter being the smaller figure sharing the plinth with Chilembwe. This photograph was taken by John Chorley's wife on 24 January 1914 at the inauguration of John Chilembwe's Providence Industrial Mission church at Mbombwe, Chiradzulu (Figure 2), Chilembwe having written to the British-born Rev. John

³ Chilembwe neglects to mention that his 1897 – not 1896 as he claims – first visit to London, en route to the USA, was entirely funded by his sponsor and mentor Joseph Booth, in whose company Chilembwe was travelling as very much the 'junior partner'. It is unlikely in the extreme that Chilembwe would ever have met Sir Brampton Gurdon [not Gordon] and visited the Houses of Parliament had it not been for Gurdon's role as chairman of the Zambezi Industrial Mission, who doubtless wished a report from Booth on Z.I.M. activities and progress. This extract from Chilembwe's letter is from an article published in *The Graphic*, London, 18 February 1911, titled 'The romance of the rupee' (Anon. 1911), in which the letter's recipient, the article's anonymous author, muses upon this little known Chilembwe missive.

Chorley, the head of the nearby Zambezi Industrial Mission, inviting him to deliver the first sermon.

The source of this information was Miss Edith Chorley, an African missionary of distinction and the daughter of the Rev. John Chorley whom I visited, in the company of Chilembwe's primary biographer, the late Professor George Shepperson (Shepperson and Price 1987 [1958])⁴ in 1994. Edith Chorley could still recall childhood visits to Chilembwe's church with her brother, Arnold, when they would play with Chilembwe's own children at the back of the church whilst their fathers discussed weightier matters. She was clear that Chilembwe and her father respected one another as equals and developed a firm friendship. She recounted how she and her father had been on board ship returning to Nyasaland from furlough in the UK when news of the rising was received. She said her father was 'thunderstruck' that the peaceable Chilembwe he admired and believed he knew intimately had so unexpectedly resorted to such naked violence.

It is therefore unfortunate that many published narratives⁵ that accompany this imaginative and ground-breaking initiative in Trafalgar Square lack the intellectual rigour and accuracy that has been clearly invested in the creation of the two statues.

Chilembwe was undoubtedly a remarkable and inspirational figure. Having obtained a rudimentary education at the Church of Scotland mission in Blantyre, so named by the Scots after David Livingstone's birthplace near Glasgow, the youthful Chilembwe sought employment with the radical English Baptist missionary, Joseph Booth (1897), who had recently arrived from Australia, bearing a note written in his own hand as proof of basic literacy. This read: 'Dear Mr Booth, you please carry me for God. I like to be your cook-boy.' (Langworthy 1950: 40)

John Chilembwe proved both an able servant and eager to learn. He made himself indispensable not only as housekeeper and cook in Booth's rudimentary dwelling, but as a companion, minder and even nurse to widower Booth's sickly nine-year-old daughter, Emily. Chilembwe's value to Booth as a translator rapidly became apparent, accompanying Booth as he sought to build a congregation and elicit funds and material support. Booth had led a varied life prior to recognizing a call to missionary work and it is fair to say he could be both 'hustler' and unashamed opportunist when needs must: elements that were to prove valuable supplements to Chilembwe's education. It was Booth who first borrowed the maxim 'Africa for the Africans',⁶ an axiom of the Rev. David Clement Scott, a past Principal of the Blantyre Mission

⁴ *Independent African* remains the seminal work on John Chilembwe and his milieu. George Shepperson recommended students seek the later, first paperback edition (Shepperson and Price 1987 [1958]) which contains a wealth of additional supplementary notes and sources.

⁵ A simple trawl of the internet will offer a range of opinions and views on this Chilembwe initiative. At the time of writing (6 February 2023), Samson Kambalu's Wikipedia entry erroneously asserts, regarding the combination of Chilembwe and Chorley on the plinth, 'Chilembwe wears a hat in an act of defiance, as it was illegal at the time for an African to wear a hat in front of a white person', citing BBC News, 5 July 2021 as the source.

⁶ Joseph Booth's polemic *Africa for the African* ('dedicated first to Queen Victoria, second the British and American Christian people and third specially to the Afro-American people of the USA.') was first published in 1897.

(Scott 1895).⁷ This was, in turn, adopted by Chilembwe in later years when head of his own mission at Mbombwe. From his lips it was regarded by the white population of Nyasaland as more a threat and war cry than a philosophical aphorism.

Hard pressed to survive, Booth evolved a highly personalised approach to Baptist theology and in so doing earned the eternal enmity of powerful, neighbouring Scottish missions. Booth poached trained artisans and teachers through the simple stratagem of offering significantly higher wages and a simple, baptismal path to Salvation without the years of study, examination and exacting social strictures imposed by the established missions. In time, Chilembwe himself would adopt a similar pragmatic approach, arguably more in tune with the age-old call of his indigenous beliefs and culture.

Much has been made of the claim, in connection with the Chilembwe statue, that the wearing of hats by Africans in Nyasaland was forbidden. This is palpably untrue. As in any hierarchical structure where the wearing of hats was the daily norm, workers (inferiors) were expected to show deference to their employers and those of similar standing (superiors) by removing their hats in their presence or doffing them when passing. The problem lay in the fact that this compulsory 'courtesy' was very rarely reciprocated by Europeans. Indeed, right up to the late 1950s as independence from British rule loomed, many Europeans routinely barked '*chotsa chipewa*' ('remove [your] hat') before they would engage with an African. Missionaries were more nuanced in their approach. Understandably, such discourtesy rapidly became a much resented symbol of racial subservience.

Chilembwe's 1915 rising was far from what might be regarded as a national revolt against British rule. The attacks on white-owned plantations, missions and property were confined to a relatively few miles around Chilembwe's mission. His army, likely numbering in the hundreds, comprised Yao officers of his own clan and overwhelmingly Nguru (Lomwe) footsoldiers, the latter mostly recent illegal immigrants from Portuguese East Africa (PEA), who had fled over the border into Nyasaland to escape famine and Portuguese colonial oppression. Nyasaland was seen as an infinitely preferable alternative to PEA.

Had Chilembwe's men not hacked off the head of a much feared estate manager, William Jervis Livingstone, in the presence of his traumatized wife and baby son and carried it in triumph to Chilembwe's church, where it held pride of place before the altar⁸ during Sunday service the following morning, it is unlikely the response of the white planters and estate employees would have been quite so brutal and unregulated. These men formed the body of the local militia, the Nyasaland Volunteer Reserve (NVR), who responded immediately with singular force and zeal.

At the time of the rising, the military, the British-officered King's African Rifles (KAR), were away in the north of the country, around Karonga, repelling invasion attempts by the Germans over the Songea River from German East Africa (now Tanzania). The KAR had only raw recruits available at the barracks nearest the rising in the nearby capital, Zomba, recruits who had yet to receive any rifle training. After a

⁷ In 1895, Scott wrote in the January issue of his monthly mission magazine *Life and Work in British Central Africa*: 'Africa for the Africans has been our policy from the first . . . '.

⁸ Properly, the correct English Baptist nomenclature is communion table.

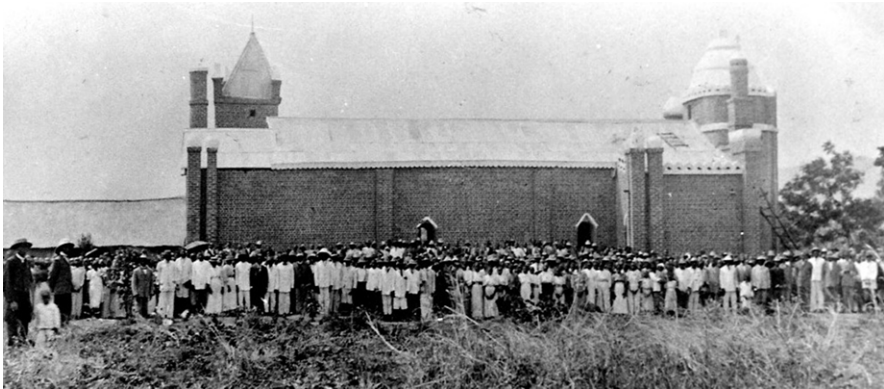


Figure 3. The congregation at the inauguration of John Chilembwe's church, 1914. Chilembwe is standing to the far left.

failed attempt to storm Chilembwe's village, the following day the KAR recruits were not issued with ammunition (presumably to prevent 'blue on blue' casualties from wild gunfire as much as a claimed shortage of munitions) and instead attacked with fixed bayonets. The village was found all but deserted.

Earlier, Chilembwe had dispatched a messenger to the Germans with a letter seeking military support. This was, on the face of it, surely naïve given the naked brutality with which German colonial forces put down similar civil unrest in their own territories, the Maji Maji rebellion in neighbouring German East Africa only a decade earlier being a case in point. Estimates put the resultant, punitive African death toll in the hundreds of thousands. In any event Chilembwe died, shot by local African police in hot pursuit, before he could receive the decidedly ambivalent German response (Cole-King 2001).

Chilembwe adopted the slogan 'Africa for the Africans', not 'Nyasaland for the Nyasas', and clearly did not recognize the Nyasaland/PEA border. To generate income, he regularly went elephant hunting in PEA. Although he held a valid Nyasaland government gun licence and a restricted game licence, Chilembwe chose to cross the border to poach elephants in PEA where game laws were less stringently observed and enforced. He also built unauthorized churches and schools in both Nyasaland and in PEA; so perhaps Chilembwe should be viewed more as a pan-Africanist than a proto-nationalist? (Stuart-Mogg 1999: 103–12).

The statue of Chorley allegedly depicts his pockets bulging with money demanded from Chilembwe as payment for services performed at his church's inauguration (Figure 3). I must say, this particular feature is not apparent to me on viewing Chorley's statue. According to Edith Chorley, Chilembwe wholly unexpectedly gave her father the entire proceeds of that day's church collection, after Chorley's inaugural sermon, to benefit the latter's own needy mission at Chipande (Chorley 2015). To suggest Chorley demanded payment to preach at the inauguration is a grotesque distortion of the truth and there is not a shred of evidence to support such

a claim. In any event, why would Chilembwe ask, let alone pay, a white man to preach on such an auspicious occasion if he despised white men, as so often claimed? The answer clearly is: he did not. High amongst the many and varied factors that drove Chilembwe to take the desperate measure of launching his ill-fated rising on 23 January 1915 was the inescapable fact that his growing mission was not receiving, doubtless in part due to Britain's declaration of war with Germany in 1914, the timely funding and material support that were so urgently required from his USA sponsors, the National Baptist Convention Board. Additionally, there was a real fear that his own fast-deteriorating health could at any time collapse completely, his long-term asthma having worsened in addition to the fact that he was nearly blind. An indication of the often parlous state of Chilembwe's enterprise is evident in a letter he wrote to the National Baptist Convention Board in June 1911.

In this letter Chilembwe describes a domestic accident which occurred when, one night, an exploding oil lamp destroyed clothes just washed by his 'industrious little wife'. He continued:

The people were afraid to come to our rescue because of the leopards, who are engaged in destroying our livestock around the station, and my eyes being weak and bad, I cannot hunt and kill them. Alas, all our clothing is burnt to ashes. My wife has nothing but night garment and me in pyjamas. My children are all naked. Please, Brethren, some good friends send us a box of clothing – second-hand, torn garments such as shirts, trousers and jackets will cover our bodies Oh, how it will rejoice in my heart if some brother will send me a baptising suit as I have a large number awaiting baptism before the year closes. (Shepperson and Price 1987 [1958]: 177–8)

This begging letter adds pathos and a very human dimension to Chilembwe and displays unexpected personal frailty in a man who, within a few short years, would send shock waves throughout Nyasaland and beyond.

Chilembwe desperately sought parity, understanding and acceptance from the European missions, notably the Church of Scotland Presbyterians⁹ and indeed the established European community at large. Such was unlikely to happen under Blantyre mission head, Dr. Alexander Hetherwick. Whereas Hetherwick's predecessor, Dr. David Clement Scott, had pursued a single, integrated congregation, Hetherwick propagated two separate congregations, based on colour (Englund 2022; Ross and Fiedler 2020). This separation came about in no small part as a pragmatic response to the burgeoning European population in Blantyre and its environs, a significant element being of Scottish origin, who voiced a clear aversion to the concept of Scott's all-embracing multicultural vision.

⁹ Chilembwe's Providence Industrial Mission was invited to join the Federated Board of Missions, an inclusive outreach he declined as it would have geographically limited his area of evangelization and required him to commit converts to a two-year programme of pre-baptismal instruction. Both these requirements would have proved serious impediments to his declared belief, ambitions and vision.

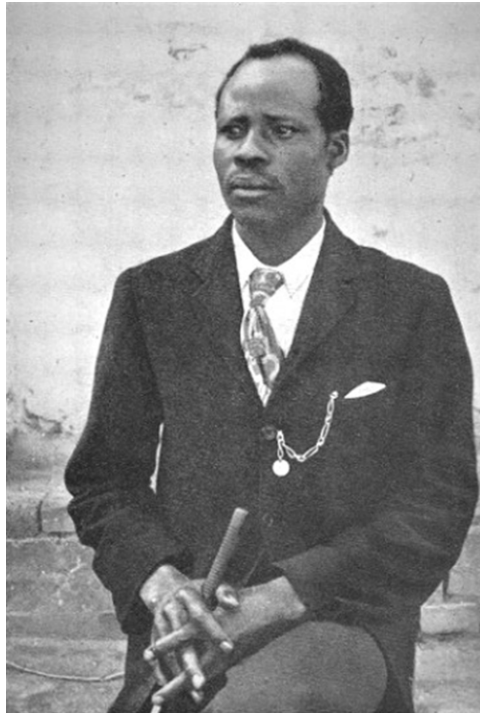


Figure 4. John Gray Kufa.

An instance of Hetherwick's seeming intransigence towards respecting, or accommodating, local orthodoxy may be found in the case of John Gray Kufa (Figure 4), an elder of the Blantyre mission, an organist and chief medical assistant.

When Kufa's brother died, tradition demanded that Kufa inherit his brother's wife and take responsibility for her welfare. Hetherwick was adamant that Kufa faced the stark choice between breaking with centuries-old convention or being stripped of his office and dismissed from membership of the church. Kufa had no choice but to suffer the ignominy of dismissal. Although Kufa readily found work as a medical assistant and owned an estate of some 140 acres (McCracken 2015: 609) it would have been at around this juncture that he appears to have flirted with Chilembwe's movement. Despite being regarded as a key lieutenant and allocated specific responsibilities, he failed to appear for duty on the night of Chilembwe's rising. Kufa was soon rounded up during the brutal retaliatory aftermath. He was swiftly charged, tried, condemned, and executed. Shocked members of the local European community felt that Hetherwick could, had he so wished, have evolved a compromise to accommodate Kufa's far from singular predicament and in so doing protect the life of a respected member of the local African community.

Chilembwe wholeheartedly embraced European modes of dress – which he termed 'the clothing of civilisation' – and deportment. He demanded that his followers dress and conduct themselves accordingly. Chilembwe expressed especial concern for the natural condition of African women, in relation to which I would suggest that too



Figure 5. Ida Chilembwe with her children (left to right) Emma, Donald and John (aka Charlie). The girl to the right dressed in white is presumed to be a servant.

little study has been devoted to the sustained support and pragmatism of his mixed-race wife, Ida Zuo Chilembwe (Figure 5) (Stuart-Mogg 2021),¹⁰ in respect of his missionary vision and endeavours.

Evidence suggests it fair to conclude that Ida was pivotal in Chilembwe's success in the educational elements of his mission's activities. In another letter to the National Baptist Convention Board, in 1912 Chilembwe wrote:

... an African woman, [un?] like her American sister, does not exert an influence for good or evil on her husband. The ordinary African woman in her heathen state is ignorant, uninteresting, and unlovable ... as my little wife, one night after my prayer, said when she heard my cry, that the women and girls are very difficult to work amongst ... please help us ... Mrs Chilembwe needs good friends to help her in her undertaking ... God has ordained them [women] as man's helpmeet – his equal not his slave. (Shepperson and Price 1987 [1958]: 174–5)

¹⁰ Ida's father was likely part-Portuguese and her mother from a local indigenous clan, possibly, Yao or Sena.

Sadly, often ill-suited cast-off clothing donated in good faith from America and the ill-assorted rag bag of local European cast-offs widely worn often made Africans figures of fun in the eyes of the very people Chilembwe encouraged them to emulate. Micro-aggressions cut to the quick and cumulatively fomented long term, deep-seated resentment.

The outbreak of the First World War in East Africa during the autumn of 1914 signalled the imminent conscription of African *askari* and, in even greater numbers, carriers (*tengatenga*) posing a grave threat to Chilembwe's aspirations, mission and livelihood.¹¹ Harsh conditions on estates and plantations would become harsher as available labour sources vanished, consumed by insatiable military demands. Any toleration of Chilembwe's proselytizing and unauthorised church and school building, never a given, would soon suffer a steelier rebuff. It was surely in these fast-deteriorating circumstances that a near bankrupt, deeply distressed, careworn and ailing Chilembwe made the fateful decision to 'strike a blow and die' (Mwase 1970: x). However ill construed and ill-fated his rising, Chilembwe's rich legacy is undeniable and today he justly holds sway high within Malawi's pantheon of national heroes.

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¹¹ See 'The voice of African natives in the present war', an impassioned *cri de coeur* from Chilembwe in the form of a letter to the *Nyasaland Times* in late November 1914, in which he decries the involvement of Africans in the (WWI) war effort. A concerned censor immediately ordered that all unsold copies of this edition were immediately withdrawn and destroyed. A full transcript of this important letter appears in Shepperson and Price (1987 [1958]: 234–5).

David Stuart-Mogg's interest in Malawi's heritage developed during his residence in Malawi where he was CEO of the Malawi Hotel Group (now Sunbird Hotels & Resorts) and Soche Tours and Travel. He was editor of *Society of Malawi Journal (Historical and Scientific)* 2001–21 and has published numerous papers and articles, including seventeen on John Chilembwe and his milieu. Email: david.stuartmogg@btinternet.com

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