

On the Unreachability of Anti-colonial Internationalism*

Ismay Milford

ABSTRACTS

This article introduces one theme from my submission to the Walter Markov Prize. Concretely, I follow exiled Malawian activist Kanyama Chiume during a pivotal moment around 1959-60, when he sought out international platforms to air anti-colonial grievances in the context of the Nyasaland Emergency. Ultimately, many of the channels that historians now recognise as central to the internationalisation of anti-colonialism – notably the United Nations – were inaccessible to him. By beginning with texts written by Chiume, and combining biographical methods with intellectual histories, we are able to distinguish the multiplicity of channels that mobile activists pursued, especially prior to 1960. This recognition contributes to scholarship on the mechanics of anti-colonial internationalism and suggests the limits that activists encountered in making it useful.

Dieser Artikel stellt ein Thema aus meiner Bewerbung für den Walter-Markov-Preis vor. Konkret folge ich dem malawischen Exilaktivisten Kanyama Chiume in einem entscheidenden Moment um 1959/60, als er internationale Plattformen suchte, um antikoloniale Beschwerden im Zusammenhang mit dem Notstand in Njasaland vorzubringen. Viele Kanäle, die Historiker heute als zentral für die Internationalisierung des Antikolonialismus anerkennen – insbesondere die Vereinten Nationen –, waren für ihn letztlich unzugänglich. Wir beginnen mit Texten von Chiume und kombinieren biografische Methoden mit Ideengeschichte, sodass wir eine Vielzahl von Kanälen unterscheiden können, die mobile Aktivisten insbesondere vor 1960 nutzten. Diese Erkenntnis trägt zur Erforschung der Mechanismen des antikolonialen Internationalismus bei und zeigt die Grenzen für Aktivisten auf, wenn sie diesen nutzbar machen wollten.

* This article is based on *Harnessing the Wind: East and Central African Activists and Anticolonial Cultures in a Decolonising World, 1952–64*, PhD thesis, European University Institute, 2019. This will appear in a revised form as *African Activists in a Decolonising World: The Making of an Anti-colonial Culture, 1952–1966*, Cambridge University Press, 2023. The writing of this article was supported by Leverhulme Trust RPG-2018-241 “Another World? East Africa and the Global 1960s”.

The pamphlet *Nyasaland Demands Secession and Independence: An Appeal to Africa*, written by Malawian activist Kanyama Chiume (1929–2007) in 1959, is an unassuming document that I picked out from two different library shelves. One was in Dodoma, central Tanzania, in the library of the *Chama Cha Mapinduzi* (Party of the Revolution), the successor party to Julius Nyerere's Tanganyika African National Union (TANU). In Dodoma, Chiume's pamphlet sat on the shelves alongside pamphlets on Hungarian co-operatives and Soviet literature, speeches of Mao Zedong in Swahili translation, and landmark works of Tanzanian political theory. Much of the material in the library dates from a period when Tanzania acted as a hub for liberation movements and exiles from across the African continent. Among these exiles – not incidentally – was Chiume himself. The other time I picked up Chiume's *Nyasaland Demands* was in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, close to where it was printed (before being later reprinted in Cairo) and not far from another pamphlet written by Chiume during the same months of 1959, *Nyasaland Speaks: An Appeal to the British People*.¹

That the pamphlet found its way to these two library shelves is not remarkable. Pamphlets written by East and Central African activists during the 1950s and published by small pressure groups were preserved by institutions and individuals both sympathetic and hostile to their message, within and far from the region. But these two particular locations have a certain symbolic resonance. They evoke two visions, rooted in the late 1950s, for how campaigns for democratic change and political independence might find success – two (intertwined) channels of anti-colonial change. This article explores these two visions through the activities and writings of Chiume during 14 months in 1959/60, during which he was exiled from his country of birth, Nyasaland, a British protectorate that gained its independence as Malawi in 1964.

The second half of the 1950s witnessed a transformation in the possible channels of protest against colonialism. As increasing numbers of states gained independence from European colonial powers following World War II, each of these states became a potential host for anti-colonial conferences – most famously the Conference of Asian and African States at Bandung in April 1955. Each became a potential patron for solidarity organizations, like the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization supported by Gamal Abdel Nasser's post-revolutionary Egypt. Each was also a potential member of the United Nations (UN), able to table motions, shape rights regimes, and form strategic voting blocs, albeit within the constraints of the Western-dominated organization. The importance of these new mechanisms has become increasingly clear through landmark histories of decolonization in the past decade, particularly related to cases like Algeria, the Congo, and South Africa, where international bodies became prominent actors in campaigns for political change.²

1 K. Chiume, *Nyasaland Demands Secession and Independence: An Appeal to Africa*, London 1959; K. Chiume, *Nyasaland Speaks: An Appeal to the British People*, London 1959.

2 R. M. Irwin, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and the Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*, Oxford 2012; J. J. Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order*, Oxford 2016; A. O'Malley, *The Diplomacy of Decolonisation: America, Britain and the United Nations during the Congo Crisis 1960–1964*, Manchester 2018; S. Manoeli,

This was a new sort of anti-colonial internationalism, an internationalization of the colonial question. Of course, anti-colonial internationalism in itself was nothing new: the interwar period had seen the rise and fall of a meeting of communist internationalism and campaigns against imperialism, while pan-Africanist thinkers had been connecting histories of transatlantic slavery to those of imperialism since the nineteenth century.³ But the post-war period marked a departure. Flag independence, especially in South and Southeast Asia, had both practical and symbolic value for activists from East and Central Africa: practically, these states could issue passports and permits to publish political material; symbolically, events like the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 made the second half of the 1950s one of emboldened anti-colonial coordination, which turned to state-based, international mechanisms. This is one of the visions for anti-colonial campaigning that I refer to.

The question that interests me here – and in my research more broadly – is what these emerging channels of anti-colonial change looked like to particular groups of activists. Specifically, I ask what they looked like to activists from regions where these sorts of state-based, international mechanisms were not in any obvious way decisive to how campaigns for democratic change and political independence, in the end, unfolded. Were these channels accessible, feasible, or even visible? Why did certain activists – even the most geographically mobile and highly networked – *not* always rely on or benefit from this increasingly internationalized anti-colonial world of the late 1950s? And what other visions for campaigns existed? If we want to understand why connections between colonized and decolonizing countries mattered to the political, social, and intellectual processes of decolonization, then these questions are important.

Individual activists like Chiume are one way to think through this question. Chiume is a name well-known in the field of twentieth-century Malawian political history, but little-known outside of it.⁴ Here, I hope to extricate Chiume from this story – from his role as one of the “young Turks” on the radical wing of the Malawi Congress Party, which orchestrated the campaign of Hastings Banda, who, as prime minister, would force Chiume back into exile just months after Malawian independence. Here, Chiume appears instead as a mobile anti-colonial publicist – one among many – who had before him a particular range of options.

Sudan's “Southern Problem”: Race, Rhetoric and International Relations, 1961–1991, Cham 2019; A. Getachew, *World-making after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*, Princeton 2019.

3 M. Louro et al. (eds.), *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives*, Leiden 2020; H. Adi, *African Political Thinkers, Pan-Africanism and the Politics of Exile, c.1850–1970*, in: *Immigrants & Minorities* 30 (2012) 2–3, pp. 263–291.

4 O. J. M. Kalinga, *Resistance, Politics of Protest, and Mass Nationalism in Colonial Malawi, 1950–1960. A Reconsideration*, in: *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 36 (1996), pp. 443–454. The fullest account of Chiume's life is Kanyama Chiume, *Kwacha: An Autobiography*, Nairobi 1975.

1. The British Public

By the time Chiume was exiled in February 1959, he had already spent some time considering how the views of Malawian activists could reach specific, useful publics inside and outside of the country. As a student at Makerere University College, Uganda, in the early 1950s, he was part of the Student Guild's mission to link the East African student body to the international student movement, whose Cold War-aligned internationals were looking to build relationships with African and Asian students. Returning to Nyasaland in the mid-1950s, he wrote articles for the relaunched nationalist organ *Kwaca* but continued to think through a regional East African lens. At the founding of the Pan-African Freedom Movement for East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) in 1958, he proposed launching an East African Publicity Committee.⁵ He was thus an obvious choice for the role of the publicity secretary in what was then the largest anti-colonial nationalist political party, the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC). It was in this capacity, and as a PAFMECA representative, that he attended the first All-African People's Conference (AAPC) in Accra, in December 1958.

Following the conference, Chiume travelled to London to spend a month publicizing the campaign of the NAC for democratic elections, secession from the settler-governed Central African Federation and self-government. As he was returning to Nyasaland, he received news that a state of emergency had been declared, on the pretence of a "murder plot" planned by NAC members.⁶ The colonial police, calling in forces from neighbouring Tanganyika and Southern Rhodesia, were sanctioned to detain NAC members without trial. Knowing that this awaited him if he returned, Chiume travelled back to London, now as a political exile.

The emergency, widely reported in the British and international press, lent weight to Chiume's campaign.⁷ He found himself called on to speak at meetings organized by the Labour-Left lobbying group Movement for Colonial Freedom (MCF) and the pan-African umbrella for students and residents, the Committee of African Organizations (CAO). The British market for pamphlets on African political affairs was small but growing, and it quickly became clear that a pamphlet written by Chiume about the emergency could be popular – and profitable – especially given that the NAC was banned and its leader imprisoned: Chiume would act as a spokesperson.

It was in this context that Chiume wrote *Nyasaland Speaks: An Appeal to the British People*, published jointly by the MCF and another British pacifist pressure group, the Union for Democratic Control (UDC), around March 1959. (In fact, there are con-

5 I. Milford, Federation, Partnership, and the Chronologies of Space in East and Central Africa, in: *The Historical Journal* 63 (2020) 5, pp. 1325–1348.

6 K. M. Phiri/J. McCracken/W. O. Mulwafu (eds.), *Malawi in Crisis: The 1959/60 Nyasaland State of Emergency and Its Legacy*, Zomba 2012.

7 For example, Nyasaland Becomes an Emergency Issue, in: *The Times*, 4 March 1959, p. 13. See also J. Lewis/P. Murphy, "The Old Pals' Protection Society?" *The Colonial Office and the British Press on the Eve of Decolonisation*, in: C. Kaul (ed.), *Media and the British Empire*, Basingstoke 2006, pp. 55–69.

flicting claims over precisely *who* wrote the pamphlet, but that is another story.)⁸ The overarching demand of the pamphlet was for free and democratic one-person, one-vote elections in Nyasaland, leading to the country's secession from the Central African Federation and then to self-government. Chiume's voice was somewhat muted in the publication; the attention instead focused on Banda, imprisoned NAC president, whose portrait appears on the front cover.⁹ The first 5,000 copies apparently sold immediately, and the pamphlet was consulted by Labour members of parliament (MPs) and trades union leaders who sought information on the emergency ahead of lobbying.¹⁰

The pamphlet's vision for how change might come about catered to the audience noted in its title: "the British People". Chiume described the "traditional friendship between my people [of Nyasaland] and the British", arguing that only with the imposition of the Central African Federation in 1953 had Nyasaland's faith in the British been damaged.¹¹ In its entirety, the pamphlet painted a picture of a coherent "British public" with a coherent set of values and then elevated the potential for this public to have a decisive impact on the course of decolonization. In the context of 1959 – in the aftermath of the AAPC and at the height of the Algerian War and the Nyasaland emergency – this approach appeared out of step with the times.

2. International Channels

This was, however, not Chiume's only audience: he was soon looking simultaneously towards international mechanisms – but not necessarily with success. In April, he travelled to Conakry, Guinea, to attend a meeting of the AAPC steering committee dedicated to the Nyasaland emergency and to the heightened unrest in the Belgian Congo.¹² Attending these meetings was more feasible from London than from the town of Blantyre in Nyasaland because it did not rely on either colonial border controls or (non-existent) direct travel between East and West Africa. In Conakry, Chiume gained support, possibly funds, for a second pamphlet, *Nyasaland Demands* – the pamphlet preserved by the library in Dodoma.¹³ On his return to London, the pamphlet was published by the CAO, a pan-African organization, comprising many student members, that was quickly overshadowing the MCF and the UDC as the leading anti-colonial body in London. The basic demands laid down in *Nyasaland Demands* were almost identical to those in *Nyasaland Speaks*, but in this second pamphlet, Chiume shifted the capacity to meet

8 I. Milford, *Harnessing the Wind: East and Central African Activists and Anticolonial Cultures in a Decolonising World, 1952–64*, PhD thesis, European University Institute, 2019.

9 The UDC sponsored Chiume to distribute postcards and pin badges picturing Banda. See A. Jupp, *Nor lose the common touch*, unpublished memoirs, 1990, Hull History Centre (hereafter HHC) DJT/5, p. 236.

10 Chiume, Kwacha, p. 120. UDC circular to African Embassy Officials, 26 November 1959, HHC DDC/3/10; Audrey Jupp to Mbiyu Koinange, 27 October 1959, HHC DDC/3/10.

11 Chiume, *Nyasaland Speaks*, p. 1.

12 The meeting declaration is reproduced in Chiume, *Nyasaland Demands*, pp. 24–25.

13 Chiume, Kwacha, pp. 120–122.

these demands from the “British public” to the independent African states. The pamphlet called on leaders of these states to form a bloc within the UN to apply pressure on colonial powers. The text lent legitimacy to the NAC – the party – rather than Banda – the personality – noting the party’s intention to “work with other nationalistic organisations” in the vein of Kwame Nkrumah’s pan-Africanist international order. Moreover, it disclosed Chiume’s doubts about the capacity of a British public to function outside of the wider colonial system:

*[I]t is only in Africa that we can expect a fully committed support for our cause. However sympathetic a minority in Europe and America may be, public opinion is conditioned by newspapers and politicians, who, when Cypriots, Kenya Africans, Malaysians, and Algerians fight for freedom, call them terrorists. Nyasaland Africans even without guns are labelled “terrorists”.*¹⁴

In the same month as his Conakry trip, Chiume published an article, on behalf of the CAO, in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda*.¹⁵ A Soviet embassy had recently opened in the Guinean capital, as in other newly independent African countries: this was another route through which the apparatus of the UN might be reached.¹⁶ Back in London, he pursued this strategy further. In July 1959, Chiume sent a circular to embassies in London that he considered “sympathetic” to the anti-colonial cause, including that of Morocco – one of six African states to have joined the UN during the 1950s, where his Kenyan friend Joseph Murumbi worked.¹⁷ The circular requested the respective governments to table a discussion on Nyasaland at the UN General Assembly. There were precedents for this, Chiume noted, in the case of Algeria, as well as that of Cyprus, where items were tabled despite the objections of France and Britain.¹⁸ No discussion was ever tabled.

Undeterred, Chiume sent a telegram directly to the UN secretary general Dag Hammarskjöld, asking him to include Nyasaland in his forthcoming travels: “Nyasaland omission in your Africa tour greatly disappointing to 3,000,000 Nyasaland Africans living [...] in Police State with 600 political detainees [...] respectfully urge you visit Nyasaland where Britain violates Charter and Human Rights”.¹⁹ Hammarskjöld’s secretary replied that the itinerary was already full.²⁰

14 Chiume, *Nyasaland Demands*, p. 6.

15 Copy of Chiume’s article “Nyasaland will be free”, printed in *Pravda*, 14 April 1959, UK National Archives FCO 141/14203.

16 E. Burton, Hubs of Decolonization. African Liberation Movements and “Eastern” Connections in Cairo, Accra, and Dar Es Salaam, in: L. Dallywater/C. Saunders/F. H. Adegas (eds.), *Southern African Liberation Movements and the Global Cold War ‘East’*, Transnational Activism 1960–1990, Berlin 2019, pp. 40–75.

17 I. Milford/G. McCann, African Internationalisms and the Erstwhile Trajectories of Kenyan Community Development: Joseph Murumbi’s 1950s, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 57 (2022) 1, pp. 111–135.

18 Chiume to Murumbi, 1 July 1959, Kenya National Archives (hereafter KNA), MAC/KEN/82/10.

19 Copy of telegram sent from Conakry, 19 August 1959, UN Archives registry section, Communication from non-self-governing territories, available through UN online, reference S-0443-0082-0002-00001 UC.

20 W. Waschmeister to Chiume, 1 September 1959, UN Archives registry section, Communication from non-self-governing territories, available through UN online, reference S-0443-0082-0002-00001 UC.

Beyond the UN, Chiume then turned to international-legal structures. In early 1960, he travelled to Iceland, with Murumbi and legal advisors, to present to Icelandic MPs the case for taking Britain before the European Commission of Human Rights. The team hoped to argue that the illegal imprisonment of leaders in both Kenya and Nyasaland under the emergency's regulations constituted a violation of the European Convention of Human Rights. In Nyasaland's case, the basis of this was the validity of the emergency in light of the Devlin Report, which several months earlier had described Nyasaland as a "police state".²¹ Again, this came to nothing.

This flurry of attempts to make use of the internationalized mechanisms of anti-colonial campaigns bore little fruit and is less visible in the historical record as a result. But these successive failures do help to explain why it was still useful for Chiume to publish pamphlets in London.

3. Publicity Strategies

Appeals to a British public and to independent states were not mutually exclusive channels for effecting change. Activists like Chiume pursued both at once, doubting the efficacy of the former and frequently blocked when attempting to access the latter. Chiume thus helps to elucidate the landscape of anti-colonial activism as it existed for a cohort of activists. When Chiume was liaising with other East and Central African students, exiles, and political representatives in London in 1959, strategy was a question on everyone's minds. The CAO was in the process of launching a campaign for a consumer boycott of South African goods, which was later to gain wide traction in Britain and internationally.²² At the AAPC, the question of violence dominated the programme: Frantz Fanon famously spoke in favour of violent insurgency as the necessary response to the violence of the colonial project, challenging Nkrumah's adoption of non-violence along the lines of Gandhian positive action.²³

The meaning of these developments for activists like Chiume was not clear-cut. As the CAO reflected:

*[N]ow that the leaders of our struggle accepted, as the Accra [AAPC] Resolution showed, that in principle the fight for freedom will be non-violent, then the success of such [non-violent] tactics will depend largely on a favourable and sympathetic world opinion, which the Committee [CAO] can, to some extent, help to achieve.*²⁴

21 Iceland Asked to Act against Britain: Detainees in Africa, in *The Guardian*, 19 February 1960, p. 3; Chiume, Kwacha, pp. 137–38.

22 S. M. Stevens, The External Struggle against Apartheid: New Perspectives, in: *Humanity* 7 (2016) 2, pp. 295–314.

23 J. S. Ahlman, The Algerian Question in Nkrumah's Ghana, 1958–1960: Debating "Violence" and "Nonviolence" in African Decolonization, in: *Africa Today*, 57 (2010) 2, pp. 66–84.

24 'Introduction', [undated, probably early 1959], KNA MAC/AFG/1/3.

An imagined global public was certainly not a new idea, but it was one whose meaning was changing together with the shifting visions of anti-colonial protests – whether consumer boycotts or armed insurgency. These routes to change relied less on international structures than on appeals to an (informed) public. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess how these interwoven visions for effecting change related to one another, whether each belonged to distinct historical moments, to specific localities, or to more or less radical political world views. Certainly, for Chiume and many of his contemporaries in the late 1950s, the fruits of an emboldened global anti-colonialism along international lines were not always easy to reach.