

PREFACE

You may never have been, may never go, may never even have heard of the place – but Malaŵi will repay your attention. It is one of the smallest, poorest countries in Africa, often overlooked; but its relationship with us in the West has been extraordinary. A meeting of worlds took place here, between one of the continent’s most fascinating indigenous cultures and the best and worst of our own. The story of this is complicated but exhilarating, by turns edifying and deeply uncomfortable. But we would do well to examine it: Malaŵi presents urgent lessons which resonate piercingly in our vexed age of culture wars and identity crisis.

How should we engage with peoples and societies profoundly unlike our own? Westerners wander the earth compulsively, foreign travel assuming an almost existential importance in our lives. Wherever we go, we want to reach out, want to connect. But besides reading the ‘history and culture’ pages at the back of the *Lonely Planet*, we are often unsure of how to do this – certainly that was my own feeling when I first arrived in Malaŵi. When globe-trotting was suspended by the pandemic, it seemed to me a good occasion to pause and reflect on this.

This book advances no programme or prescription for cultural exchange; rather it observes in Malaŵi a near perfect case study: from Livingstone and the early missionaries, through British colonialists, to today’s tourists, expatriates, aid workers and even Madonna, the country has experienced the full gamut of Westerners trying to get to grips with an enthralling alien culture. The shared context urges us to

weigh these approaches against each other, and against our own. But if the purpose of travel is also to learn something about ourselves, then Malaŵi answers this need too: the country forms a strange, luminous backdrop, against which Westerners appear starkly. Who we are, what we stand for, what we bring to others, for good and ill – all are more perceptible here.

These subjects are approached obliquely, through a mix of history, travelogue, biography and memoir, as I describe the land, its people, and my unlikely presence among them. I first came as a teacher of Latin and Greek, soon after I had completed a Classics degree at Oxford. When I left, it was to study medicine in London, but by then I had grown attached to Malaŵi, so I returned whenever I could. At length I qualified as a doctor and was lucky to be able to go back as a clinical volunteer and experience the country very differently. My impressions – some brief, some extended – were therefore varied and collected over several years.

I came to fixate on how closely interwoven Malaŵi's story is with our own in Britain. It encompasses slavery, imperialism and the struggle for independence, as well as much more recent events. Throughout all this, there has grown a sympathy between Malaŵian and European cultures which runs far deeper than the politics. Embodying this is Dr Banda – Hastings Kamuzu Banda – who lived almost the full hundred years of the twentieth century: a peasant-scholar who became a doctor, a rebel turned reactionary, a champion of African independence who aged into a brutal, senile dictator.

Banda ruled Malaŵi for thirty years until 1994. He was variously monstrous and magnificent, exalted and absurd. My interest in him was stirred by his unusual preoccupations: with culture, identity, belonging. He left home as a boy and wandered to South Africa, America,

Britain. He eagerly adopted the ways of others, but always felt the exile's uprootedness and urge to reconnect. He was infatuated with both Africa and the West, but truly at home in neither. This discord inspired an idiosyncratic vision of how the best of both might be brought together, preserved, and celebrated.

The most flamboyant expression of this was a project to advance his country's development through the study of Greco-Roman civilisation. In the 1980s, he established 'the Eton of Africa', an academy in the Malaŵian bush intended specifically to promote classical education. This institution – or rather its bizarre afterlife – was my introduction to the country. But it also posed the challenge which first impelled me to write this book. I knew from my own student days that Classics had lost its prestige in the West. More and more, the legacy of Greece and Rome was to be forgotten, repudiated, 'decolonised'. What was I to make of such extravagant homage paid to it in Africa? Banda's vision was eccentric and deeply flawed, but, in its problems and paradoxes, it illuminates many of our contemporary uncertainties, especially as we falter towards the ideals of multiculturalism.

As I write, Trafalgar Square's Fourth Plinth has just been adorned with two surprising new statues: of Malaŵian anti-colonial rebel John Chilembwe and an English missionary friend of his. The decision to erect these – in the wake of Black Lives Matter and the toppling of Edward Colston's statue – suggests to me that others also recognise the relevance of Malaŵi's history to contemporary Western concerns. As we shall see, however, the story evoked by the statues is not as straightforward as their sponsors had in mind. Like so much else in Malaŵian history, it is ambiguous, and cuts to the core of the current tense debate about Britain's imperial past.

Trigger warnings are due, although this book perhaps requires more than I can enumerate. Banda was a hero in the struggle for racial equality and against colonialism, but he was also an unashamed elitist, a black man who – in today’s parlance – was ‘on the side of the patriarchy’. As such, he might have been invented to discomfit modern sensibilities.

There is then the broader historical context of the West’s record in Africa, past and present. On this subject, a number of orthodox narratives have come to prevail, but the Malaŵian example does not always reinforce them. In fact, it is frequently subversive.

Lastly, the borrowing and refashioning of others’ heritage is pursued with abandon by many characters in this book, most notably by Dr Banda. Our own society has made of this a grave taboo, in fearfulness of being charged with cultural appropriation. But a more equivocal response seems warranted in Malaŵi. If there has been appropriation here, it has not always traduced or diminished. It may even have revitalised and enriched.

Malaŵi is of course materially poor and undeveloped, so it is impossible to skirt over many sad realities of its daily life. My object is never to denigrate; on the contrary, I write primarily in admiration, especially at so much hardship overcome. For despite its poverty, Malaŵian society strikes me as fundamentally healthy. Its peoples are almost quintessentially rooted in time and place, bound by a rich history to their land and each other. Perhaps it is because of this, above all, that the disconnect with our own unsettled culture is felt most strongly. It was long upheld that Malaŵians could only develop with help and guidance from the West. Well, that is for them to decide. But we might now try to invert this way of thinking: today it is the West that should take lessons from a small African country.

PART ONE
ET IN MALAŴI EGO

DR BANDA & ME

I had long been aware of the abandoned palace on the hill. It was pointed out to me soon after my arrival in the country, and I observed it from afar with curiosity whenever I drove past. Now at last I was taking the rough road behind the bustling little town that sat beneath, up through the forest to the frayed perimeter fence. It had been arranged for me to catalogue the palace library (whatever was left of it), but I sensed in advance that there might be more to my visit than this. Part of me wondered if I might even find treasure – but I was really looking for something that would shed light on my own perplexing presence in Malaŵi.

My background was suburban, middle class, raised in the West, half English, half Oriental. I grew up amid the unchallenging cosmopolitanism of south London. I was fresh out of Oxford, optimistically equipped for the world with an undergraduate Classics degree. My friends were all knuckling down to serious office jobs back in Britain, so what on earth was I doing in a tiny, impoverished, land-locked country 7,000 miles away? Notionally I was there to teach Latin and Greek – but this answer only prompted further questions.

The approach to the palace was steep, and the views grew wide with the ascent: vast, empty plains to the east; endless

dense forest to the west, both unbroken to distant horizons. Minutes before I had been amid noise and squalor, the heat and the dust, assailed by every stereotype of small-town African life: ragged children, bleating livestock, a frenzied market, monstrous trucks. Now, up on the hillside, it was cool, still, quiet. And I remember the smell: the faint, sweet aroma of the surrounding bush, mingled with that of tarmac grown warm in the tropical sun.

The road snaked up to a rusty steel gate that was creaked open by an elderly caretaker. He appeared to be living alone in an adjacent shack, and the place was otherwise deserted. Formal gardens were turning to scrub. Dead leaves choked dried-out fountains. A sapling thrust through a crack in the disused helipad.

I pulled up before the main house, a mass of peeling white stucco, fallen red roof tiles and colonnades entangled by creepers. It had been stripped bare, but a robust, concrete pavilion was set apart from the rest and appeared to be intact. Baboons scattered from the forecourt as I approached. Once inside, the classicist in me gasped with delight: there were dusty books from ceiling to floor. Luxury commingled with decay, like Miss Havisham's house re-imagined in Africa: lion and leopard skins sprawled under foot, tattered by moths; the silk wallpaper was nibbled by termites; cobwebs spanned crystal chandeliers. I set to work on the collection, heaping books and cataloguing them at a large Louis Farouk desk, taking care not to antagonise the wild bees nesting in a corner behind me.

I found an adjoining strong-room, the thick steel door of which had been left ajar. There was no power, so I had to rummage by torchlight: it was all a jumble of packing crates and filing cabinets overflowing with loose papers and bric-à-brac. Only on my final sweep did I notice a small oak casket bound with brass and leather, hidden under a

pile of battered oil portraits of Mugabe, Gaddafi, Nyerere. It was unlocked. I took it out into the sunlight and opened it to discover a 1584 edition of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, printed in Venice by Aldus Manutius, the most celebrated press of the Renaissance. The front page bore a stamp: *EX LIBRIS H. KAMUZU BANDA*.

Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The Ngwazi or 'Conqueror'. And, variously: His Excellency, the Life President of the Republic of Malaŵi, Destroyer of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Father and Founder of the Malaŵi Nation, Messiah, Saviour, Lion of Africa, Doctor of Medicine, Fellow of the Royal Societies of Surgeons & Physicians (Edinburgh), Bachelor of Arts (Indiana), Bachelor of Medicine & Surgery (Tennessee), LRCP, LRFP&S, PHB, Hon. DSc, Hon. LLD (Massachusetts), Hon. LLD (Malaŵi), Hon. LLD (Wilberforce), Hon. LLD (Indiana) and so on.

Even by the Rococo standards of post-colonial Africa, Banda was one of the most astonishing leaders the continent has ever witnessed. He was born just a few miles from the palace, on an uncertain date in the late 1890s. His family were peasants, living in what was then British Central Africa, later known as Nyasaland. Malaŵi was the name Banda chose for the country at independence in 1964.

He had been the first of his family to go to school and was taught by missionaries who came to his village. As a teenager, he walked a thousand miles to South Africa and found work in the mines. He was intelligent and lucky: after several years, he was awarded sponsorship to go to America, where he spent a decade studying Classics, history, literature, anthropology and – finally – medicine. On qualifying, he moved to Edinburgh and later London, where he worked for fifteen years.

As a suburban family doctor in Harlesden, he earned the adoration of his patients, moved in sophisticated circles, joined the Fabian Society, entered the Freemasons, had an affair with a married Englishwoman, canvassed for Atlee's Labour party in the 1945 election and intrigued with African exiles conspiring against imperialism. Never once during this period did he return home.

Malaŵi was part of the 'great interior' of Africa, 'opened up' by Livingstone, then absorbed into the British Empire in 1891. By the 1950s, however, when Banda might otherwise have been contemplating retirement from medicine, independence was in the air. From his semi-detached house in north London, he coordinated a network of anti-colonialist agents who worked to promote his reputation back at home. When he returned for the first time, in 1958, he was welcomed rapturously. The outgoing British administration initially imprisoned him but realised after a year that he was the most popular and best qualified man to take over power. In 1964 he led Malaŵi to independence, won the country's first elections, and then ruled as 'President for Life' for the next thirty years.

His supporters continue to protest the designation 'dictator', but it is difficult to resist. He dispensed with democracy early on and thereafter ruled with authoritarian vigour: 'Everything I say is law – literally law,' he proclaimed. His regime operated by one-party rule and rubber-stamp parliament. There was judicial murder and extra-judicial assassination, defenestration and defalcation; there were cabals, cabinet crises and cult of personality, private extravagance, paramilitary enforcement of petty regulation and parcel bombs posted to overseas dissidents. However, almost until the end of his rule, Banda remained popular. He kept Malaŵi stable, orderly, and out of local conflict – utopian conditions by the standards

of the region at that time. Within the limitations of such an undeveloped country, Malaŵi prospered, for a while.

But when I arrived in 2009, Banda was twelve years dead and his achievements lay in ruins. I stood in the empty palace, contemplating the desolation. And what of the mysterious book in my hand? It seemed as out of place as I was. How had a priceless, antique edition of the most famous work of Roman history ended up on a remote mountain in the middle of Africa?

Of course it was Banda's. Like me, he was obsessed with Classics – the study of the Greco-Roman world, its languages, literature, history, culture. His interest began during his early education in America, before he studied medicine. It remained with him all his life and, when he was president, became more and more important to him. Knowledge of the ancient world, he convinced himself, held the key to his country's advancement. And so in 1981 he opened Kamuzu Academy, a boarding school founded specifically so that the nation's ablest children, however poor, might study Latin and Greek.

The 'classical education' emerged in Europe during the Renaissance and came to occupy a central place in the cultural landscape of the West. In nineteenth-century Britain, it was felt to supply the mental equipment that qualified you for government, at home and in the Empire. Banda first encountered its influence in the colonial administrators, missionaries and settlers whom he met in his boyhood.

By the second half of the twentieth century, however, Classics had become an embarrassment. The subject underpinned a historical narrative that lay in tatters after the barbarism of two world wars. The radical politics of the 1960s condemned it as the paradigm of

blinkered Eurocentricism, and it began to fade from the school curriculum. But for Banda, Classics still stood for civilisation. Greek and Latin granted access to the wisdom with which the West had flourished: why should it not do the same for Africa? In *The Republic*, Plato envisioned a class of philosopher guardians trained from youth to rule with justice and far-sightedness. The alumni of Kamuzu Academy would assume this mantle and ensure their nation's future.

But the experiment miscarried, and it was only thanks to the strange twilight of Kamuzu Academy that I ended up working there. An attenuated Classics department just about endured into the new millennium, and I learnt that a vacancy had arisen shortly after completing my first degree. I wanted to go to Africa, and it was probably the only job on the entire continent that I was actually qualified to do.

I began to discover odd, sometimes uncomfortable, affinities with Banda. Before I applied to teach at his school, I was already planning the same move from the arts to medicine that he had made in his youth. When I returned to Britain, it was to re-train as a doctor, yet my enthusiasm for Classics stayed with me, as it had with him.

Banda was torn between his African and European identities. Infatuated with both but at home in neither, he spent his life precariously balancing the two. When he returned to Malaŵi after a separation of over forty years, he tried strenuously to recover and reconnect with his own culture while simultaneously promoting the 'high culture' of Europe. I suspect he often felt as much a stranger in Africa as he had while living in the West, everywhere conscious of a rootedness in others that was absent in himself.

I had no connection with Africa before moving to Malaŵi. My father is from Thailand, my mother from England. But like Banda, I've always felt something of a stranger in

the two societies where I might claim membership – never unwelcome or ill at ease, just aware of my own difference. Growing up in London, multiculturalism was my norm, but it left me unsatisfied, and I doubted if I could ever properly get to grips with either my Thai or English heritage. But in the classical world there seemed to glimmer an ideal, universal culture that transcended – without negating – contemporary national differences. Claspig Banda's prized edition of Caesar, I surveyed the immense view and wondered if he had felt something similar.