

John Chilembwe

Brief life of an anticolonial rebel: 1871?-1915

by ROBERT I. ROTBERG

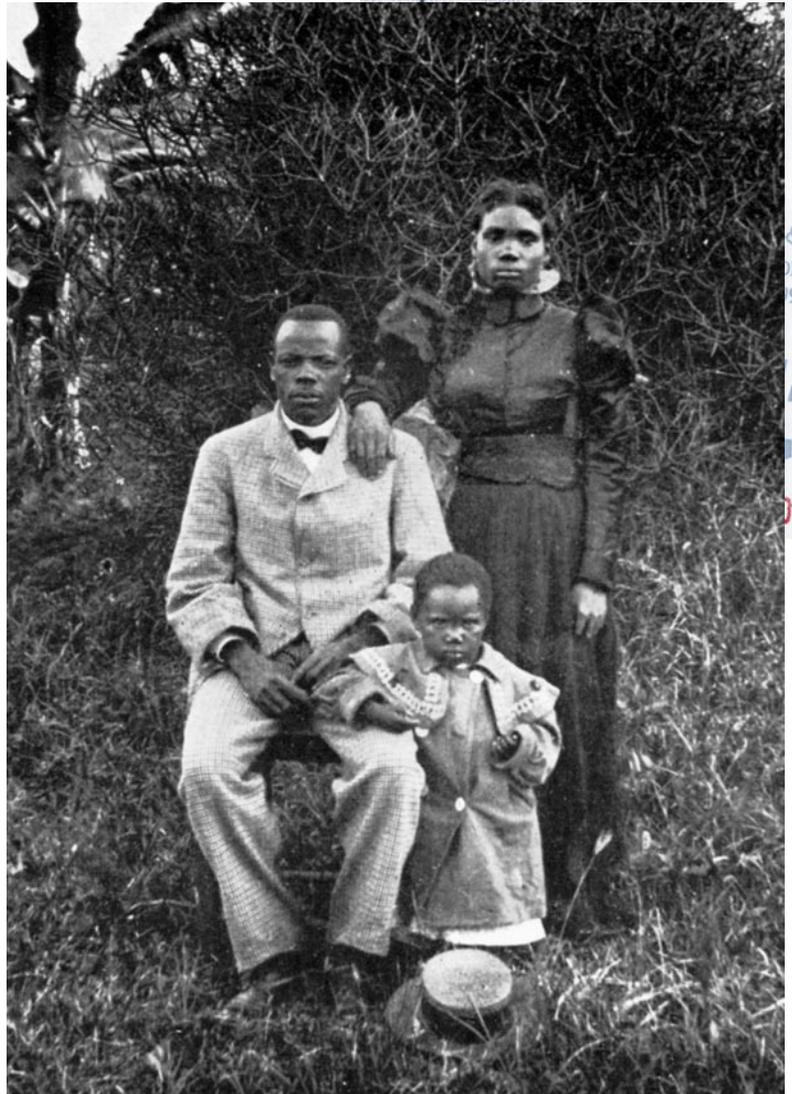
NINETY YEARS AGO in what is now Malawi, a tall, asthmatic, American-trained Baptist preacher attempted bravely, in the manner of John Brown at Harper's Ferry, to strike a strong blow against white racism. Was he a conscious martyr in the cause of African independence, or did John Chilembwe secretly suspect that he and a small group of fellow Africans could oust their overlords and gain control of their own destinies?

A contemporary Scottish missionary in then Nyasaland regarded Chilembwe (chil-EMB-way), before the fateful rebellion, as "above the ordinary type of mission native." A near-contemporary Malawian wrote, "He exhorted people [against] strong drinks...taught adults and children to keep on work, not to lounge about....He liked to see his country men work hard....and to see them smart, such as negro fellows he had seen in America....He preached against carnalists, murderer, robber...." Chilembwe's Providence Industrial Mission, at Chiradzulu in the southern Shire Highlands of the British protectorate David Livingstone had inspired, was lauded for its vocational-education program, industriousness, and rather orthodox Baptist teachings. Unlike many African preachers of the day, Chilembwe was neither radical nor millennial. No one predicted that a man of his strict training would become a rebel.

The son of a Yao father, Chilembwe in 1892 joined the domestic staff of Joseph Booth, an eccentric, apocalyptic British fundamentalist missionary of Baptist persuasion. Critical of the established Scottish Presbyterian missions, where Chilembwe had been educated, Booth established the Zambesi Industrial Mission and propagated egalitarian ideas: "Candidly now, is it not a marvelous picture to see elegantly robed men...preaching a gospel of self-denial to men and women slaves....I have never felt so utterly ashamed.... We ought to...conform to [the] teaching [of the Gospel]." This gospel of African freedom alarmed the colonial government and other missionaries.

According to Booth, Chilembwe had a great desire to learn and write; he soon became a trusted companion of Booth's children. In 1897, he traveled with Booth to Lynchburg, Virginia, where he attended a small African-American seminary, imbibed the ideological ferment of African-American intellectual circles, and learned about John Brown and other abolitionists and emancipators.

By 1900, Chilembwe was back in Nyasaland working for the



American National Baptist Convention. Soon he had established a chain of independent African schools, constructed an impressive brick church, and planted crops of cotton, tea, and coffee. He sought to instill in fellow Africans a sense of self-respect.

In the years immediately preceding the 1915 rising, the area around Chilembwe's mission was hit hard by famine. Immigrants flooded in from neighboring Mozambique, crowding the land available to local Africans, while white settlers seized the most fertile acres. A tax imposed on African huts forced many African

000



men to find work

in distant cities. Moreover, William Jervis Livingstone, a local plantation manager, treated his laborers (many of them Chilembwe's parishioners) harshly and burned down Chilembwe's rural churches. (After the rising, even protectorate officials admitted that conditions on the estate were "illegal and oppressive.") Chilembwe complained loudly about racism.

But his profound alienation followed the outbreak of World War I in Europe, and the recruitment, which Chilembwe deplored, of Nyasa men for battles against the Germans in neighboring Tanzania. "We understand that we have been invited to shed our innocent blood in this world's war...[But] will there be any good prospects for the natives after...the war?" Chilembwe asked. "We are imposed upon more than any other nationality under the sun." The remainder of his open letter, signed "in behalf of his countrymen," was a sharp protest against the neglect of Africans.

A month later, in January 1915, Chilembwe decided to "strike a blow and die, for our blood will surely mean something at last." This was the only way, he declared, "to show the whiteman, that the treatment they are treating our men and women was most bad and we have determined to strike a first and a last blow, and then all die by the heavy storm of the white men's army." He spoke to his 200 followers of the inspiration of John Brown, and warned them not to loot nor to molest white women. On January 23, in different attacks, his men beheaded Livingstone, killed two other

white men and several Africans while sparing a number of white women and children, looted an ammunition store in a large nearby town, and retreated to pray. When the rising failed to arouse local support, a forlorn Chilembwe fled toward Mozambique. Unarmed, wearing a dark blue coat, a striped pajama jacket over a colored shirt, and gray flannel trousers, he was killed by African soldiers on February 3.

Chilembwe is revered as a hero in modern Malawi, which achieved independence in 1964. He was its first principled rebel, its first serious protester against colonial rule, and the first to shatter the widespread imperial belief that "the natives were happy" under foreign domination. ▽

*A longtime faculty member at Harvard and MIT, Robert I. Rotberg directs the Program on Intrastate Conflict and Conflict Resolution within the Kennedy School of Government. He is also president of the World Peace Foundation. Quotations in the text are from his 1965 book *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa* and his 1967 edition of George S. Mwase's *Strike a Blow and Die*.*

Opposite: John Chilembwe with his wife, Ida, and daughter, Emma, in a photograph probably taken between 1910 and 1914. Chilembwe's image also appears on the obverse of Malawian banknotes printed between 1994 and 2000.