



# Knowledge, power and school history in post-independence Malawi: A critical analysis of curriculum change (1964-2022)

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## **Abstract**

Emerging educational research in Africa reveals an eventful course of development for school history curricula in post-colonial African states as they grappled with issues of quality and relevance in history education. In exploring the internationally little-known case of Malawi, the article takes a diachronic approach to retracing the process of history curriculum change from the country's independence from Britain in 1964 to the time of writing in 2022. The study proposes a systematic analysis of the content, pedagogy and assessment methods foregrounded by evolving history syllabuses in response to curriculum review processes over the last six decades. It also provides insights into the shifts undergone by Malawi's priorities and aspirations in the context of its legacies of European colonialism, one-party dictatorship and authoritarianism and its transition to democracy in the mid-1990s. Illuminating the entanglements of these processes with power politics and their contribution to the stagnation of the discipline of history, the article concludes that, although successive reviews have promoted curriculum change over time, they have failed

to bring about meaningful reform.

**Keywords:** Malawi; History Curriculum; Curriculum Reform; Curriculum Politics; Decolonization; Post-colonial; Critical Theory.

## Introduction

Emerging research on education in Africa reveals an eventful course of development for school history curricula in post-colonial African states as they grappled with issues of quality and relevance in history education (Bentrovato & Wassermann, 2021). Over the past century and a half, African societies have experienced the colonial displacement of traditional forms of education through the introduction of formal school history, designed to promote European value systems (Moweunyane, 2013). Subsequently, they have seen the contestation of colonial history education in the aftermath of independence from colonising powers and its frequent replacement with school history curricula that served as tools for legitimising the rule of the new nation-states' founding fathers and their successors, often under the pretext of a concern with salvaging and transmitting "authentic" histories (Bentrovato, 2013, 2018a, 2018b; Kaarsholm, 1992; Kalinga, 1998; Zeleza, 1990). Today, history education in African countries is the subject of often tense debates around the rationales and approaches that will enable it to best align to national and global priorities.

This article explores the internationally little-known case of Malawi, a southern African country with a century-long history of subjection to colonial and autocratic post-colonial rule. Part of a British protectorate from 1891 and of the British-controlled Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland between 1953 and 1963, it became independent in 1964 and a totalitarian one-party state in 1970 under Hastings Kamuzu Banda, before transitioning to a system of multi-party democracy in 1994. Taking a diachronic approach, this article retraces the process of secondary school history curriculum review in the six decades of Malawi's post-colonial period to date, and critically analyses its products. The study focuses both on prescribed curricular content and on the accompanying proposed pedagogy and assessment and their objectives. Illuminating the entanglements of the process with power politics and its contribution to the stagnation of the discipline of history, it argues that, although successive reviews have promoted curriculum change over time, they have failed to bring about meaningful reform.

The research underlying the article references a broader context of educational and historiographical work on Malawi. It builds on studies on the history of education in the country, most notably the now outdated and politically biased work by Kelvin Banda (1982) on education from pre-colonial times to the early 1980s; the examination by Chakwera, Khembo and Sireci (2004) of national school assessment programmes in post-colonial Malawi and the performance of the Malawi National Examinations Board; and the more recent studies by Chirwa and Naidoo (2014) of the history of curriculum change

and development in Malawi. More specifically, our study joins and enriches the as yet small number of publications on history education in Malawi. Less recent studies in this area include the work by Lora (1980) on the applicability of Piaget's formal operational thinking to the teaching of history in Malawian secondary schools, the assessment by Morrow (1986) of the problem of resources in the teaching of history, and the examination by Bonga (1990) of the relationship between the use of instructional media and pupils' academic achievement in history at senior secondary level. Among the most recent publications in this area are the exploration by Dzikanyanga (2018) of continuities and changes in history pedagogy in Malawian secondary schools since 1964 and studies on junior secondary history textbook representations of women (Chiponda, 2014; Chiponda & Wassermann, 2015) and people with disabilities (Chiponda, 2021). Alongside the matter of education, our work draws on and complements research on politics of history and memory in Malawi (Kalinga, 1998; Kenyon, 2009; Moyo, 2001; Mweso, 2014).

## **Theoretical framework and methodology**

The key bearing of politics and power on the process examined in this article makes critical theory an opposite approach to understanding the continuities and changes in curricular content and in the prescribed methods of its implementation and delivery that are at the centre of this historical study. The central argument of critical theory is that all knowledge is invariably historical and political in character due to the influence of divergent human interests (Bourdieu, 1984). Critical theorists further contend that knowledge production and the exercise of power go hand in hand – a position most famously articulated by Foucault (1980); they accordingly seek to problematise and destabilise that knowledge (Nichols & Allen-Brown, 1996). It is in this context that they regard school curricula as instruments for legitimising the authority of ruling powers, imposing state-sanctioned knowledge upon societies and in so doing maintaining existing regimes of privilege and social control (Apple, 2019; Salehi & Mohammadkhani, 2012). It is in this spirit that this article applies a critical theory lens to its analysis of Malawian history curriculum documents, via which it will retrace the historical trajectory of curriculum review in the subject.

The documents sampled for this study include state-produced history syllabuses,

alongside chief history examiners' reports and examination question papers.<sup>1</sup> These sources were collected from various institutions of education and educational policy in Malawi, including the Ministry of Education offices in Lilongwe, the Malawi Institute of Education (the country's national curriculum development centre) in Zomba, Education Division Offices in Lilongwe and Mzuzu, the Malawi National archives in Zomba, and various secondary schools in the northern and southern regions of Malawi. The process of collection, which took place between January 2020 and June 2021, took care to cover the entire period of Malawi's post-colonial existence, that is 1964 to 2022. The focus of the analysis is secondary history education, encompassing junior level, leading to the national Junior Certificate of Education (JCE) examination, and senior level, at the end of which students take the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) examination, a qualification for third-level institutions.<sup>2</sup>

The study conducts qualitative content analysis of the sampled documents, enabling the identification of emerging patterns and trends within the data set, defined via inductive processes of data coding. The analysis seeks to identify continuities and changes in the significance attributed by policymakers to the subject of history by analysing stated rationales for its study. It further aims to ascertain the nature of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that successive regimes' policies have prioritised via the content of prescribed teaching and learning, the associated learning objectives, pedagogy, and methods of assessment. Contextualising these findings, we draw attention to the political shifts underlying these continuities and discontinuities as Malawi's post-colonial history unfolded.

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1 The school syllabuses are produced and distributed to schools by the Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) while the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) produces national examination papers and chief examiners' reports. Schools receive examination papers a few days before the commencement of national examinations. The chief examiners' reports, which detail how candidates approached every examination question, are sent to schools immediately after the release of national examination results.

2 In post-independence Malawi, history was and is taught as a separate subject in both lower and upper secondary schooling. At primary level, history became part of an overarching subject area known as Social Studies in the mid-1990s.

## **History curricula and their review under Banda's presidency (1960s-1980s)**

The historical antecedents to Malawi's post-independence education system had their roots in schools initially established by European Christian missionaries from 1875 and, following a period of neglect by the British colonisers, the creation of a Department of Education in 1926 (Banda, 1982; Chirwa & Naidoo, 2014; Lamba, 1984). In 1933, the colonial government introduced a centralised primary school curriculum, which included the study of history, to the principal end of instilling moral values and loyalty towards the British monarchy. Secondary school education, introduced in the then Nyasaland Protectorate in 1941 and modelled on the elitist academic system of the English grammar school, also included history. Taught by European expatriate teachers, the subject treated Malawi as an ahistorical entity and a mere appendage of the British Crown. The colonial school curriculum, determined by external examinations, principally included English and Commonwealth history, with very little African history (Banda, 1982). The British imperial narrative was a dominant educational discourse, and placed special emphasis on Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (Kalinga, 1998:525). Echoing practices observed elsewhere in the British Empire, school history projected the colonised "as lazy, backward and savage while extolling the imperial powers in bringing civilization to the colonies" (Chia, 2012:193). At independence in 1964, Malawi, like other new countries across the continent that were engaged in their own nation-building projects (Bentrovato, 2013, 2018a), began to review the inherited curriculum, which clearly failed to resonate with the nationalist aspirations of the newly independent state (Zezeza, 1990).

The first major history curriculum review took place in 1969, in the wake of the Johnson Report of 1964 which had called for a radical change in content and methods of teaching in schools, in line with the socio-economic transformation in progress in post-colonial Malawi. Its aim was to overhaul the colonial history syllabus and examinations which had determined secondary school history education since 1941 (Chimwenje, 1990). As such, the review formed part of the Africanisation project with which Malawi, in line with the recommendation of the 1961 Addis Ababa Conference in favour of ending the prioritised status of non-African history in schools (UNESCO/ECA, 1961), embarked upon the endeavour of writing and subsequently teaching its own national history in response to the disjunct between colonial historiography and the needs and aspirations of the post-colonial nation (Banda, 1982). Drawing on the International Congress of African History held at the University College of Dar es Salaam in 1965, the History Department at the University

of Malawi took a leading role in these Africanisation activities, designing a university syllabus on the History of Malawi and training history teachers (Banda, 1982; Kalinga, 1998; Pachai, 1966).<sup>3</sup> In line with the aim, associated with the Africanisation project to find potential figures of national and nationalist identification in the African past, the “History of Malawi” university course, introduced in the mid-1960s, celebrated precursors of the nationalist struggle in Malawi such as John Chilembwe, Eliot Kamwana, Charles Chidongo Chinula, Charles Domingo and Hastings Banda.

### ***The reviews of 1969 and 1987: decolonising content, still centring examinations***

In 1969, against the backdrop outlined above, Malawi’s parliament enacted a law that created the Malawi Certificate Examination Board (MCE Board); its mandate was to develop a new syllabus and administer the Malawi Certificate Education (MCE) examinations to replace the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate examination. From 1972 onward, the MCE Board carried out this task in conjunction with Britain’s Associated Examining Board (AEB) in order to ensure “high standards and ... international recognition” (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1972b:7).<sup>4</sup> In announcing the impending reforms to curricula and assessment, the Ministry of Education and Culture emphasised the importance of centring the new curriculum around serving local needs and aspirations relating to socio-economic development. In terms of history education, three major concerns drove the reform of curricula: the introduction of local history, meaningful engagement of learners in the history classroom through the principles of constructivism, and assessment of learners via locally administered examinations (Johnston, Blake, Porter & Twum-Barima, 1965). Established to address these concerns, the MCE Board, which had neither a separate curriculum development section nor curriculum specialists on its staff (Chimwenje, 1990), prioritised examinations over pedagogy, possibly due to long-standing attitudes among educational reformers that privileged subject matter over methods. The treatment afforded to aspects of curriculum development beyond examinations therefore proved less than rigorous, with no attempt made to provide guidelines for history pedagogy in schools. The focus on examinations in the history curriculum review of 1969 may additionally have stemmed

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3 Between 1967 and 1993, the Department organised several biannual conferences and published manuals for history teachers on new trends and best practices in historical scholarship and pedagogy.

4 The MCE Board-AEB arrangement continued until 1989, when the MCE Board took full responsibility for the examinations, becoming the Malawi National Examinations Board.

from the fact that the MCE Board, which prescribed school curricula and monitored their implementation, was an examinations board first and foremost; it simply prescribed topics of study without delineating the extent of coverage for each topic.<sup>5</sup> Knowledge of content accordingly took centre stage during the 1969 curriculum review, a primacy which continued to have a cascading effect on subsequent reviews.

The JCE history syllabus, running to only five pages, largely limited itself to listing seven topics to be covered and to briefly describing the expected examination format, comprising of fill-in-the-gap(s) exercises, short-sentence answers, guided continuous writing, and a choice of essay questions. The topics prescribed showed a *de facto* exclusive focus on Africa and Europe. They addressed prehistory; early African “civilisations” followed by European “civilisation”, from Mesopotamia to the Renaissance; Europe’s “extension” through “voyages of exploration”, the transatlantic slave trade and the colonisation of Africa by the Portuguese, Dutch and British. The topics further addressed Europe and Africa, with a focus on the Industrial Revolution, the partition of Africa and World War One; and nationalism and independence movements in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi, the latter emphasising the African National Congress (ANC), Banda and his Malawi Congress Party (MCP), and the “fight against the Federation” of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1968). This content points to the apparent persistence of a colonial-era perspective within the curriculum’s attempted move towards Africanisation, evident, among other things, in the term “extension” and the romanticising trope of “voyages of exploration” in reference to European colonising activities; these wordings betray a perspective familiar to those educated in colonising nations before critical reflection became commonplace. Furthermore, as the next section of this article will explore more fully, it indicates that a re-politicisation of school history accompanied efforts towards Africanisation, as evident in the emphasis on the emancipatory anti-colonial movement in Malawi led by Banda.

The Malawi Certificate of Education (MCE) history syllabus for senior secondary school level similarly had five pages and briefly stated its aim to be the assessment of students’ understanding of the prescribed topics, before setting out the examination format and content coverage. Assessment in this subject, with teaching assumed to amount to a weekly minimum of three hours, consisted of a two-hour paper comprising two equally

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5 This meant that, on numerous occasions, examinations went beyond what teachers actually taught in class, while at other times the Board failed to assess some of the content and skills taught in history classrooms (Chakwera et al, 2004:7).



weighted sections of essay questions for candidates to choose from.<sup>6</sup> Evidencing the influence of the colonial period, the first section covered the “History of Central Africa from 1000 to 1964 AD”, examining political and socio-economic developments in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe – the three countries which had formed erstwhile British Central Africa, comprising Northern Rhodesia (today’s Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (today’s Zimbabwe), and the Protectorate of Nyasaland (today’s Malawi) (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1972a:36-39). The section encompassed 10 topics:

- the Iron Age;
- pre-colonial kingdoms, particularly the Luba-Lunda complex, Shona, Maravi, Tumbuka-Nkamanga, and Ngonde;
- the Portuguese influence in “the Livingstone period”, signalling the significance attributed to the Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone, who much influenced Western views of Africa;
- the slave trade, specifically by Arabs/Swahili and Yao;
- “the missionary factor”, an expression echoing the title of *The Missionary Factor in East Africa* (1951), a reference work by the prominent English Africanist Roland Oliver, and primarily referring to Protestant, Catholic and Muslim influences;
- the Ngoni and the Ndebele, focusing on their migration, “occupation” and organisation in the region;
- European occupation and administration, and local resistance movements and activities, notably the Ndebele War of 1893, the Shona-Ndebele revolts of 1896-7 in Southern Rhodesia, and the Chilembwe rising of 1915 in Nyasaland;
- social, economic and political developments up to 1953;
- the years of Federation (1953-1963);
- and the independent states of Malawi and Zambia, including their struggles for independence and the constitutions they gave themselves upon attaining it.

The section on Central African history remained silent on various aspects of the past, obscuring, for instance, the histories of several communities, such as the Sena, Tonga, Lomwe, Nyiha, Ndali and Lambya, while contrastingly foregrounding the history and

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<sup>6</sup> The examination paper included eight questions for each section, with candidates choosing a total of five questions, i.e. any two or three per section.

heritage of the Tumbuka, Ngonde and Chewa. This reflected the creation of an invisible “other” and the loss of social capital associated with this labelling (Mkandawire, 2010). The second section, on “World History in the Twentieth Century (1900-1964)”, primarily covered the two World Wars, including the interwar period, as well as the Cold War and decolonisation in Asia and Africa.

In line with the systemic emphasis on examinations that had likewise prevailed hitherto, the subsequent review of the school history curriculum, conducted in 1987, sought to improve the content validity of history examinations for the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), previously the MCE. The 1987 MSCE history syllabus (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1987) retained a substantially unchanged overall aim, but introduced the innovation of briefly outlined assessment objectives, requiring students to explain and interpret historical events and ideas and “relate them to contemporary issues”, discuss causes and consequences, “evaluate historical information, and form [an] opinion on it”. This explicit inclusion of discipline-specific historical thinking skills is also notable for the fact that no express reference to the societal or civic uses of history appeared alongside it. The examination, combining mandatory multiple-choice questions with essays,<sup>7</sup> now consisted of two two-hour papers, i.e., “Central Africa” and “The World Since 1900”, rather than a single two-hour paper; a concomitant increase in the minimum teaching hours per week to four spoke of the rising perceived importance of history among school subjects. Although the new curriculum attempted to introduce a disciplinary approach to the teaching and assessment of history in schools, the structured questions in history examination papers proposed during this time, and largely concerning names and dates, reveal continued practices of assessment amounting to audits of students’ acquisition of content knowledge. The nature of the content assessed likewise saw no substantial changes, beyond the merging of topics on Central African history and the reduction of their overall number to seven. Changes in the detail of the content included the replacement, in the pre-colonial kingdoms topic, of Tumbuka-Nkamanga with the Chikulamayembe kingdom, and of Shona with the Zimbabwe and Mwenemupata kingdoms, removing, in each case, the primary association of these kingdoms with particular ethnic communities. Further changes were the designation of the Ndebele, Ngoni and Kololo (a group not featuring in

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<sup>7</sup> Each paper consisted of two sections, one comprising 25 compulsory multiple-choice questions counting for one-third of the total marks, the other featuring six essay questions of which candidates were to choose three.

the previous syllabus) as “19<sup>th</sup>-century immigrants”; and the removal of the Ndebele War of 1893 as an example of anti-colonial resistance.

### ***Controlling the curriculum, disciplining society***

The broader context of the curriculum reviews outlined above is one of the exertions of firm and oppressive political control over Malawi’s history and its teaching. The post-independence creation of the Ministry of Education, whose purpose was to implement the education policies outlined in the 1961 Malawi Congress Party (MCP) manifesto, established close links from the outset between education policy in Malawi and the ideologies of the MCP, which was in power from 1964 to 1994. Banda was a history graduate and enthusiast who, like numerous leaders and governments around the world, sought to harness the country’s past for the legitimisation and survival of his regime. A critical juncture in the politicisation of Malawian history education was the Cabinet Crisis of 1964, during which junior cabinet ministers rebelled against Banda and were consequently expelled from the MCP. This development led Banda to effectively suspend research into and free discussion of the country’s recent political history. Henceforth, Banda controlled the production and dissemination of historical knowledge through legislation, political propaganda and espionage (De Baets, 2002; Kalinga, 1998; Kenyon, 2009; Sturges, 1998), successfully “construct[ing] a historical narrative that dominated public discourse for nearly 30 years” (Mweso, 2014:21).

In his examination of post-independence historical knowledge production in the 1960s, Kalinga (1998) highlights Banda’s influence on public memory through, among other things, the adoption of the name Malawi (a Portuguese misspelling of the precolonial kingdom of Maravi to which the Chewa – Banda’s ethnic group – belonged), the declaration of holidays such as Martyrs Day and Kamuzu Day, which foregrounded Banda’s own heroic historical role, the deposing of chiefs, and the giving of public lectures on the country’s history. Moyo (2001) and Mweso (2014) observe that Banda promoted his own Chewa language and culture, elevating them to national status at the expense of the languages and cultures of other groups. The history of the Maravi was taught at all levels of schooling, while the history of other groups rarely featured in the history curriculum. Further instruments of Banda’s control over publications and the curricula of schools and colleges included the restriction of access to the National Archives, a rigid application of the Censorship Act, and the notorious Malawi Censorship Board, whose effects on the discipline of history were particularly severe. The telling list of works it banned between 1968 and 1994, in

line with Banda's pro-Western, anti-communist and authoritarian attitudes, included books on the USSR and the Russian Revolution, torture, nationalism and the overthrow of rulers (De Baets, 2002).<sup>8</sup> In this way, Banda's version of Malawi's history became the official history of the country. The History Department at the University of Malawi suffered extensive repression, seeing its attempts to write an alternative history of Malawi thwarted by legislation and intelligence activities (Kalinga, 1998:549) and, as De Baets (2002:340-341) notes, finding itself able to teach the History of Malawi course only selectively to avoid police intervention. Banda purged the Department of lecturers deemed too radical, and others escaped into exile.

These repressive restrictions resulted in very limited serious research that could have sustained history education in the country, and inevitably impacted the history curriculum. They involved the removal of history textbooks from the school curriculum after their banning; one example is the exclusion from the curriculum in 1975 of *From Iron Age to Independence: A History of Central Africa* by D.E. Needham (1974), which was not to return until 2001, well after Banda's fall from power and death in 1997. The curriculum was purged of sources and content deemed to contravene Banda's "four corner stones" (unity, loyalty, obedience and discipline) or to challenge his power. For instance, teaching about prominent nationalists who had become *personae non gratae* with Banda, including Kanyama Chiume, Yatuta Chisiza, Masauko Chipembere and Orton Chirwa, was forbidden despite the contribution these figures had made to the country's independence struggle. Mweso (2014:17) has pointed to the enforcement, including by violent means, of a particular reading of the past via the "extreme form of politics of memory and historiography" and indoctrination that accompanied Banda's rule. Among the effects of this reading was the emergence of a cult of personality that "plac[ed] Banda at the centre of the struggle for independence" and "only glorified and celebrated his achievements" while subjecting his political opponents to historical erasure and in so doing effectively de-memorialising earlier anti-colonial endeavours. In this context, Malawian history teachers were *de facto* political agents whose job was to promote loyalty to Banda's republic, with strict adherence to the "four corner stones" and a teaching of history in line with Kamuzuism, a messianic ideology around Banda's person (Chirambo, 2004:148). The upshot was a "banking" model

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8 These works include, among others, *A History of Torture throughout the Ages* by G.R Scott; *The Rise of Nationalism in Central Africa: The Making of Malawi and Zambia 1873 – 1964* by R.I. Rotberg; *The History of the Russian Revolution* by Leon Trotsky; *Impact of the Russian Revolution* by Arnold Toynbee; *Dr. Banda's Biography* by P. Short; *Strike a Blow and Die* by Chief Mwase of Kasungu; historical works on the USSR; a book on the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah; and a historical study on the assassination of Shaka Zulu.

of education, which Paulo Freire (1970), the father of critical pedagogy, has identified as the hallmark of oppressive education and which essentially treats pupils as receptacles for prescribed knowledge. It was supported by a political hidden curriculum which curtailed meaningful debate in the history classroom and which found covert use as scaffolding for the existing political superstructure in post-colonial Malawi.

Various conditions concomitant to these developments, identified in research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, served to augment the impact of the restrictive atmosphere characterising the curriculum's implementation. In line with the focus on instilling prescribed content as outlined above, a teacher-centred lecture method of teaching predominated in classrooms, hampering the development of historical thinking (Lora, 1980). Chronic scarcity of adequate and appropriate resources compounded the issues. What materials were available consisted largely of outdated and Eurocentric textbooks recommended by the Ministry of Education, and little else found its way into history classrooms,<sup>9</sup> with the exception of notes taken by teachers during Banda's routine history lectures at political rallies. The situation had a negative impact on the conditions in which teachers delivered the classes and their motivation (Morrow, 1986). An exacerbating factor in this context was disparity in the distribution of instructional materials, notably textbooks, on which most teachers relied, it not being typical practice to use supplementary media in the history classroom. This led to variations in the teaching delivered and consequently to achievement gaps among history candidates at MSCE. A downward trend in achievement among history students in national examinations was observable (Bonga, 1990).

## **History curricula and their review in the post-Banda, multi-party era (1990s-2000s)**

The collapse of the dictatorship and the re-introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994 ushered in a new era, providing an enabling environment for a less politicised review of the school history curriculum and a more critical pedagogy. During this period, the Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) took over the role of secondary school curriculum development from the MCE Board, and a teaching syllabus replaced the examination syllabus in 2001. New reconsiderations of historical narratives which flourished in the

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<sup>9</sup> Resources such as historical maps and, more broadly, chart paper, overhead projectors, working slide projectors, crayons and felt-tip pens were generally hard to come by, while typewriters and duplicating facilities were usually oversubscribed.

aftermath of Banda's fall from power provided room to teachers and students for a critical examination of the existing social order.

### ***1995-2001: a teaching syllabus emerges, along with a tentative shift***

Changes in curricular content and modes of assessment in school history began soon after the transition to democracy. The origins of the review that took place at this time are traceable to the political changes of the early 1990s that had culminated in the collapse of Banda's regime and the country's democratisation. In 1995, the new government had produced an Education Sector Policy Investment Framework (PIF) to guide educational reform in the context of the country's new-found democracy. The framework called for an immediate review of the school curriculum (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture [MESC], 1995). An initial one, focusing on Junior Certificate (JC) examinations, took place in the same year, replacing all structured and essay questions in the JC history examination paper with multiple-choice questions, although the prescribed content remained largely unchanged. Unlike the review of 1987, which aimed at diversifying assessment practices, the 1995 review was primarily a cost-cutting measure which introduced ICT to assessment, using machine-readable cards for examinations which computers then marked rather than teachers. One of the effects was to entrench the memorising of information for the specific purpose of passing the exam – a form of teaching to the test – as the primary mode of history education at this level in Malawi, compromising the pedagogical quality of the subject's teaching and entrenching "banking" educational practices.

Subsequent reviews saw the issuance of a syllabus for junior secondary level in 1998 (MESC, 1998) and a new senior syllabus in 2001 (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MOEST], 2001). The MIE, which had focused on primary education since its inception in the 1980s, became involved in the development of the new secondary school curriculum. Teaching syllabuses, now aligned with the National Goals of Education (NGE) developed by a stakeholders' conference held in 1995, replaced the examination syllabuses which had been in place since the 1940s. The new history syllabus was more prescriptive in its effect on teachers, as it specified what they should teach, how they were to teach and assess it, the books to use and the pace of their teaching. The resulting 40-page syllabus, developed by subject panels at the MIE with the technical and financial assistance

of the World Bank, DANIDA<sup>10</sup> and UNFPA,<sup>11</sup> now detailed the rationale of the review, the subject's specific rationale and objectives, and the scope and sequence of the content to be covered, before providing a table that covered the suggested teaching, learning and assessment.

The rationale for the reform given in the document characterises it as a response to socio-economic changes after independence, noting that the previous curriculum had been “out of tune with emerging issues” affecting the country and stating that the reform sought to cater to the aspirations of individuals and the nation, enabling learners “to function as responsible and productive adults in their society” (MESC, 1998:ix). The rationale for the teaching of history sets out that history is part of culture and helps build identities, and that it is vital to understand the past in order to understand the present and plan for the future (MESC, 1998:ix). The objectives of the subject's study, as outlined in the syllabus, include the development of a spirit of national unity and patriotism and of appreciation of national institutions. Alongside these evidently nationally (or nationalistically) oriented objectives, more cosmopolitan aims such as tolerance towards different views and beliefs, an appreciation of economic interdependence among peoples, and an understanding of the contemporary world make an appearance. We might view the additionally stated aim of encouraging a sense of national, regional and international understanding as a form of hinge between these two distinct groups of objectives. Another noteworthy goal, more specific to the discipline of history, is to engender an appreciation of technological developments over time. Historical skills including description, analysis, comparison and evaluation of historical events complete the list of objectives. The use of eight key themes – technology, migrations, systems of government, religion, economics, imperialism, nationalism, and cooperation<sup>12</sup> – to structure the curriculum's content points likewise to potential pedagogical innovation, albeit not entirely followed through.

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10 Danish International Development Agency.

11 United Nations Population Fund.

12 They covered a wide range of topics and cases. The imperialism theme, for instance, included such topics as the Assyrian and Roman invasions of Egypt, the Arab occupation of the East Coast and Portuguese and Arab-Swahili settlements in Central Africa, the ‘scramble for’ and partition of Africa, Jihads, Hitler's and Mussolini's policies of expansion, and the spread of communism. The nationalism theme covered such topics as the Balkans and the German annexation of Austria in the context of the study of the two world wars, and independence movements and decolonisation in India, Ghana, Zambia and Malawi.

## ***The 2013 review: a paradigm shift towards individual outcomes***

The post-independence curriculum reviews examined thus far took place under the purview of Malawi's colonial-era Education Act of 1962. The most recent review, undertaken in 2013 with implementation commencing in 2015, rested on the foundations of the new Malawi Education Act of the same year. There is a striking contrast in the approach to curriculum development and implementation taken by the two Education Acts. While the 1962 Act did not specify the methods of teaching, learning or assessment to be employed in the classroom, the 2013 Act, currently in place, prescribes a constructivist pedagogy geared towards developing students' critical thinking skills (Dzikanyanga, 2018) via student-centred methods, the treatment of knowledge as provisional and contestable, and appreciation of diversity (MOEST, 2019), all of which are in line with the principles espoused by critical theorists.

The review of 2013, proceeding against this backdrop, emerged from the Secondary School Curriculum and Assessment Reform (SSCAR), itself a continuation of the Primary Curriculum and Assessment Reform (PCAR) of 2000. The review introduced outcomes-based education (OBE), which emphasises the outcomes produced by students after teaching and learning has taken place and ascertains them primarily through continuous assessment, as opposed to examinations (Chirwa & Naidoo, 2014). This, alongside the concomitant new, marked focus on activity-based learning, represented a paradigm shift in school history education, and specifically its pedagogy. The rationale for the review, in the words of the curriculum document it produced, was to improve quality and relevance via an "emphasis on student-centred teaching and learning approaches" and a "focus on student achievement". Comparing it to the previous review, we see here less emphasis on what the student thus educated can do for their society, and more on what society, via education, can do for the student. The rationale appears in line with Malawi's general "secondary education outcomes [that are] ... categorised into seven sets of essential skills": citizenship skills, ethical and socio-cultural skills, economic development and environmental management skills, occupational and entrepreneurial skills, practical skills, creativity and resourcefulness, and scientific and technological skills (MOEST, 2013:viii). The accompanying rationale for teaching the subject of history sees small modifications vis-à-vis the previous syllabus. Competencies cited this time round include research skills for tracing the origins of cultural traditions and the "interrelationship between the past and present generations" and critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making via an



understanding of “causes, effects, and lessons learnt” from the past. Notably, the rationale asserts that “[h]istory also has a utilitarian dimension in that it unearths a catalogue of indigenous knowledge, skills and values which can be utilised for personal advancement, employment and the general development of the society” (MOEST, 2013:viii). The fact that “personal advancement” comes first in this list of potential benefits, and societal development last, ties in with the increased emphasis on the individual student and their acquisition of capabilities and “outcomes” as analysed above. The “objectives” set out in the previous syllabus have given way, in line with the focus on outcomes, to “assessment standards” and “success criteria”, and the level of analysis expected of students appears to have increased, with a requirement to explain and discuss as opposed to stating and outlining.

Overall, the 2013 document is more elaborate than previous syllabuses, defining prescribed content, and the scope and sequence of teaching, in notable detail. It sets out themes and topics for each form and each of the two terms in an academic year; each of these topics comes under one of five “core elements” with a related outcome. The rationale for these categorisations is not always immediately evident. The outcome for the “core element” entitled “Patriotism and nationalism” states that “[t]he students will be able to demonstrate an understanding of issues of patriotism and nationalism and their socio-economic and political impact on society and nations, and how these have evolved over time”; this phrasing reveals a more analytical and disciplinary approach as opposed to that of the previous syllabus, which had called for students to demonstrate a spirit of patriotism and nationalism. The other four “core elements” are “Inter-relationships among the individual, family and society”, and “Inter-dependence between Malawi and the world”, highlighting local-national-international historical connections; and “Economic and social issues in history”, and “Leadership styles in history”, ensuring students cover socio-economic and political dimensions of history (MOEST, 2013:xi). Each theme or topic has an entry in a table which details “Assessment standards”, “Success criteria”, “Suggested teaching and learning activities” that go into more depth than the 1998-2001 syllabus, and rather general “[s]uggested teaching, learning and assessment methods”. The syllabus specifies an array of methods, teaching formats and resources, ranging from textbooks and essay writing to museum visits, role plays, simulations and interaction with a “resource person”. This is a level of detail, and a methodological breadth, which the previous syllabus did not reach.

The content of the curriculum is broadly similar to previous syllabuses, with some noteworthy exceptions. One relates to the newly introduced study of the Yao, now joining the previously included Ndebele and Ngoni in the curriculum as nineteenth-century

immigrants to Central Africa. The curriculum contains references to their conversion to Islam and role in the spread of Islam in the region, alongside the Swahili-Arabs, explained through their trade with this group and their culture and religious beliefs. The 1969 curriculum had closely intertwined the historical narrative of the Yao with the East African slave trade; the 2013 revision omits this previously emphasised role, reattributing it to Swahili-Arabs and “Africans” more generally. The Yao reappear later on within a discussion of “communities that participated in the trade” (MOEST, 2013:28). There is a noteworthy balanced discussion of Christianity’s influence in the region. Students are to be encouraged to “debat[e] the impact of Malawi missionary work in Malawi, e.g. positive e.g. western education, end of [the] slave trade, promotion of commerce, pacification of hostile people”, and “negative e.g. destruction of indigenous culture (dance, dress, religion, food)” and the missionaries’ role as “harbingers of colonization”. In this equivocal picture, we note remnants of colonial discourse alongside what is readable as more anti-colonial content with a nationalist thrust. The discussion of the Chilembwe uprising as a “symbol of later resistance to colonialism” likewise fits this latter context, with students called upon to explore its “significance ... in the development of nationalism in Nyasaland” (MOEST, 2013:28).

We might be tempted to conclude from this detail that the new political dispensation had provided a conducive environment for critical pedagogy and that, as envisaged by critical theory, education had received the opportunity to become a springboard for democracy. Nevertheless, politics and society retain the power to decide whether or not to respect the standards of scholarly history (Wilschut, 2010). The curriculum reviews which occurred after Banda’s fall from power were anxious to overhaul the narrative he had propagated, and Banda’s successors have likewise attempted to control the history taught in schools. Bakili Muluzi, for instance, co-authored a history book titled *Democracy with a Price: The History of Malawi since 1900* in 1999, which became a recommended school textbook, albeit one neither objective nor politically neutral in character. Similarly, the school curriculum only incorporated the history of the Lomwe once a Lomwe president, Bingu Mutharika, had come to power. It may be that the change in the visibility and depiction of the Yao, as noted above, bears witness to analogous politically motivated considerations.<sup>13</sup> These events are indicative of the continued use of history education as a weapon for moulding and

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13 Since independence in 1964, Malawi has been ruled by leaders from the Central region (Kamuzu Banda, 1964-1994 – a Chewa) and the South (Bakili Muluzi, 1994-2004 – a Yao; Bingu wa Mutharika, 2004-2012 – a Lomwe; Joyce Banda, 2012-2014 – a Yao; and Peter Mutharika, 2014-present – a Lomwe).

controlling society, as posited by critical theorists, and point to the damage sustained on an ongoing basis by Malawi's history curriculum owing to political contestations over the country's past and present, epitomised by the establishment of ethnically-based associations with political undertones such as the Chewa Heritage Foundation, Mulhako wa Alomwe, the Maseko Ngoni Heritage Association and the Mzimba Heritage Association (Lusaka, 2020; Kayira & Banda, 2013). The existence of these groups is a visible indicator of a covert struggle for control of Malawi's past, characterised by conflicts among historical narratives both within and outside of schools.

## **Discussion and conclusion: cosmetic shifts and overlaying persistent politicisation?**

The analysis in this article has retraced the process by which, not long after independence, Banda's regime took control of the production and dissemination of historical knowledge, including in schools. The collapse of the dictatorship and the re-introduction of multi-party democracy in 1994 ushered in a new era, providing what may appear, on a reading of the curriculum reviews that have taken place since this date, an enabling environment for a less politicised school history curriculum. It remains debatable; however, whether, despite what appear to be significant endeavours towards reform, a fundamental tendency towards the politicisation of school history persists in Malawi, rather than a genuinely critical pedagogy of history having taken hold.

Considering all reviews of the history curriculum in post-colonial Malawi, it is evident that one of their major effects has been a move towards Africanisation. In line with dynamics evidenced across the continent, the reviews have led to an "increased emphasis on African, national, and local history and a concomitant reduction in content related to Western or European history" (Bentrovato, 2017:28). In addition, the curriculum has expanded to incorporate historical narratives pertaining to various ethnic groups in Malawi that were previously left aside. This is the culmination of the groundwork laid by the History Department at the University of Malawi in the 1960s in the context of the 1961 Addis Ababa Conference and the 1965 International Congress of African History. However, a lack of funding and political will to promote local historical research and teaching has resulted in the persistence of colonial historiographies, stereotypes and interpretations of history. Specifically, and concerningly, the use in schools of outdated history textbooks, mostly produced in Europe, persists. While, as this article outlines, the history curriculum itself has undergone various shifts in line with educational research, textbooks published in the

1960s, such as *A Map History of the Modern World* by B. Catchpole (1968), *World History in the Twentieth Century* by R.D. Cornwell (1969), *The Modern World since 1870* by L.E. Snellgrove (1968), *East and Central Africa to the Late Nineteenth Century* by B. Davidson (1968), and *The History of Central Africa* by P.E.N. Tindall (1968), have remained major points of reference for history teachers and students alike since the 1970s. These books continue to serve as key sources for history textbooks being written in Malawi, with limited research funding availability among the issues inhibiting the development of alternatives; it is a reality that runs counter to the process of school history's decolonisation in the country. An exacerbating factor here has been a relative lack of interest in school history education among university history lecturers over the last three decades; in the academic setting, the writing of educational materials for schools has been a low-status activity (Dzikanyanga, 2018:114). Africanisation endeavours face the further challenge of the fact that there has never been a fully locally driven curriculum review in post-colonial Malawi. Theories of, and funding for, curriculum review remain domains of the West (Ndjabili, 2004:31). Chirwa and Naidoo (2014:344) contend that although political, social and economic variables have had an impact on curriculum change and development in post-colonial Malawi, "globalisation has been another influential factor in shaping curriculum change and development in Malawi when the country became a democratic government in 1994". Over time, MIE, which took over responsibility for secondary school curriculum development from the Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) in 1998, has grown increasingly subject to the wishes and requirements of Western democracies due to the input of donors into curriculum reform processes. Of late, it has come under the influence of South Africa, which is increasingly driving curriculum innovation in the southern part of the continent (Chirwa & Naidoo, 2014; Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008). Indeed, Chirwa and Naidoo (2014) argue that Malawi borrowed the idea of the OBE curriculum from South Africa despite its several weaknesses in a bid to promote a global agenda. MIE, like other institutions of education in Africa, is therefore an effectively semi-independent institution, that – some positive impacts notwithstanding – experiences considerable systemic barriers to a full consideration of realities on the ground prior to the implementation of curriculum innovations.

Another effect of the history curriculum reviews has been a gradual move away from a traditional fact-based history pedagogy which presents history to the student as given, unquestioned knowledge and assesses it as if this knowledge were static. This conventional approach had been the pedagogical mainstay of Malawian history education between 1964 and 2000, entrenched by politicians' propagation of parochial historical narratives for

state-building purposes and the use of high-stakes examinations testing the memorisation of unreflected facts. History teaching in Malawi has progressed towards a more disciplinary approach which promotes students' historical literacy by requiring them to practise historical thinking. The curriculum review of 1997-2001 adopted the teaching syllabus which encouraged students to "do" history in the classroom. A strong undercurrent of traditional pedagogy nevertheless remains, as attested to by chief examiners' reports and examination papers revealing the persistent importance of memorising selected content. The reviews have engendered the concomitant development of a "bulky" history curriculum, stemming largely from curriculum developers' long-standing prior tendency to centre content over competencies. Since the 1970s, the junior secondary history syllabus – to cite an example – has covered a vast expanse of time, extending chronologically from prehistory to the contemporary world. The senior secondary syllabus has always taken the form of two separate courses of study, each of which is content-heavy. The rearrangement of the syllabuses into themes has not ended their division of the history course into blocks of time to be taught in a strict chronological order. Greater bulk has come about as a result of the political wishes of powerful local and global actors. Malawians have, for instance, seen the successive addition to the curriculum of the histories of various Malawian communities, including the Chewa, Jere Ngoni, Maseko Ngoni, Tumbuka, Lomwe and Yao. Several other groups of Malawians, such as women and people with disabilities, remain excluded from curricula and marginalised in textbooks, mirroring their treatment in society at large (Chiponda, 2021; Chiponda & Wassermann, 2015). Viewed through a critical theory lens, the bulkiness of the syllabus may appear as a result of the struggle for control of the country's past and present fought between dominant groups in Malawi; the removal, for instance, of community histories, however, would likely be problematic and essentially retrograde, pursuing an exclusionary rather than an inclusive approach to rationalising the curriculum.

An overarching impact of the curriculum reviews has been to politicise history in schools. It has often been the case in many parts of the world that "nation-building architects [have made] extensive use of history to promote those historical narratives that embody the politically correct teleology of the state" in question (Zajda, 2009:373). In Malawi, history education was a significant tool in Banda's consolidation and legitimisation of political power between 1964 and 1994. Banda's successors have sought to undo the historical narrative he established and bring their own influence to bear on history in schools, which has included giving other dominant communities access to control of the narrative. The subject's incorporation into Social Studies at primary level, with its focus on government and

politics, possibly provides greater potential for politicisation. A critical theory perspective on these events would read them as the side-lining of students' interests in the use of the school history curriculum as a political battleground, which would run counter to the centring of the student and their individual interests in knowledge and development as set out in the syllabus of 2013. That syllabus' move away from the hitherto consistent focus on examinations appears emancipatory in terms of potentially lessening dependence on memorisation and teaching to the test; it may be that the subject's continued politicisation is undermining this ostensibly progressive development. Indeed, even after the adoption of the teaching syllabus in 1998 – superseding the previously focal role of examinations – and the introduction of the OBE curriculum in 2013, teaching to the test has continued to dictate history curriculum implementation in Malawian schools, in line with the “gate-keeping role” of examinations in the Malawian education system as observed by Chakwera *et al.* (2004). Further gate-keeping by examinations, of a different nature, appears in the tendency among history teachers, as remarked upon in chief examiners' reports, to rely more strongly on national examination papers than on the history syllabus when making pedagogical decisions (MANEB, 2017).

A conclusion from the above summary of these effects might be that curriculum reviews in post-colonial Malawi have promoted change without genuinely engendering reform. Notwithstanding the evolution in curricular content and teaching methods, other determinants of change, such as the training received by teachers at universities and colleges of education and the character of examinations, history textbooks and educational policies, continue to negatively affect the quality and relevance of history education in Malawian schools. It may be that the spirit of recent reviews continues to need time to diffuse into the various domains of history education in Malawi, notably into textbooks and tendencies to handle large volumes of content by teaching to the test.

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