

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The politics of literature in Malawi: Filemon Chirwa, *Nthanu za Chitonga* and the battle for the Atonga tribal council

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Abstract

In 1932, as Nyasaland (present-day Malawi) was heading to indirect rule, a small vocal community in the north of the country resisted the colonial government's attempts to assign them a Native Authority. Instead, they proposed their own form of government: a council of thirty-two *mafumu* (chiefs) who would make decisions on an egalitarian basis, the Atonga tribal council. The champion of this alternative form of governance was a Tonga intellectual named Filemon K. Chirwa. At the height of the political manoeuvring to institute the Atonga tribal council, Filemon wrote and published his only book: *Nthanu za Chitonga* (Folktales in Chitonga). This article argues that this book was – and still is – an important piece of political literature. Through an exploration of the context of the creation of the Atonga tribal council, it sets out the stakes that were at play in the construction of local traditions and customs, and then shows how the book was part of a project of producing an image of these. It then explores the 'afterlife' of the book, as it became a symbolic force in contemporary village communities, not only articulating the sense of political marginalization experienced, but also capturing a new form of political agency. The article concludes by suggesting that Filemon Chirwa's collection of stories is an astounding example of the deeply political role that folktale literature can play within colonial and (post)colonial Africa.

Résumé

En 1932, alors que le Nyasaland (l'actuel Malawi) s'orientait vers une administration indirecte, une petite communauté bruyante du nord du pays résista aux tentatives du gouvernement colonial de lui attribuer une Native Authority (autorité indigène). Au lieu de cela, elle proposa sa propre forme de gouvernement : un conseil de 32 *mafumu* (chefs) chargé de prendre des décisions sur une base égalitaire, le Conseil tribal d'Atonga. Le champion de cette autre forme de gouvernance était un intellectuel tonga du nom de Filemon K. Chirwa. Au plus fort des manœuvres politiques pour instituer le Conseil tribal d'Atonga, Filemon écrit et publia son seul livre : *Nthanu za Chitonga* (Contes populaires du Chitonga). Cet article soutient que ce livre était, et est toujours, une œuvre importante de littérature politique. À travers une exploration du contexte de la création du Conseil tribal d'Atonga, il expose les enjeux de la construction de

traditions et de coutumes locales, puis montre comment le livre s'inscrivait dans un projet de production d'une image de celles-ci. Il explore ensuite l'« après-vie » du livre, devenu une force symbolique dans les communautés villageoises contemporaines, non seulement en articulant le sentiment de marginalisation politique, mais également en capturant une nouvelle forme d'agentivité politique. L'article conclut en suggérant que le recueil d'histoires de Filemon Chirwa est un exemple étonnant du rôle profondément politique que peuvent jouer les contes populaires dans l'Afrique coloniale et (post)coloniale.

In the early 1930s, the British protectorate of Nyasaland (present-day Malawi) was experiencing a time of turbulent change. After twenty years of rule under the District Administration Native Ordinances (DANO) of 1912 and 1924, the colonial government was working towards establishing 'indirect rule', the colonial policy that was instituted across Africa in which local communities would ostensibly be ruled by their own 'traditional' leaders who would then be accountable to the colonial government.¹ In Nyasaland, this would ultimately result in the Native Authority and Native Courts Ordinances coming into effect in 1933 (Power 2010: 30). These ordinances were intended to vest extensive administrative powers in traditional chiefs and headmen given the status of 'Native Authority'. While the colonial administration was able to institute this system across the majority of the Nyasaland protectorate, one small corner of the country, home to a handful of Tonga communities, refused to accept it. 'This little area,' the provincial commissioner (PC) for the north stated, 'is a microcosm of all that is worst in Tonga politics, and contains all the factors that make those politics so bewildering and violent.'² The little area the PC was referring to was a collection of villages and trading stations south of the Luweya River on Lake Nyasa's northern shoreline. Part of the Chinteche District, it was home to members of an ethno-linguistic community who called themselves Tonga.³ In this district, a small but powerful political faction rejected the colonial government's proposal for indirect rule through Native Authorities. Instead, they wished to institute an Atonga tribal council, a council of chiefs that would rule democratically in the place of a Native Authority. As Joey Power has outlined in her work on the political history of Malawi, the case of the Tonga people of northern Malawi offers an important example of African contestation to British indirect rule. At a time when British colonial authorities were widely instituting chieftainships across their African colonies to undergird systems of indirect rule, northern Malawian Tonga managed, for a brief period of time, to institute a form of rule that did not coincide with the 'hierarchically organized system' the British wanted to establish (Power 2010: 35). Rather, a distributed form of governance based on a council of thirty-two chiefs was achieved. The 'main champion' of this idea was Filemon Khumkhwara Chirwa (*ibid.*: 38).

¹ Malawi National Archives (MNA), Records Management Centre (RMC), 4.6-812/4701, 'Concerning the Tonga tribal council 1930-1944. The ATC and rebels'.

² MNA RMC, 1/36/36, 'Native Politicians'. Letter 'To the Honourable Chief Secretary in Zomba, 19th October 1950 from the Provincial Commissioner of the Northern Province', 550/417/50.

³ There are an estimated 270,833 Chitonga speakers in present-day Malawi, the majority of whom live in the Nkhata Bay District (National Statistical Office of Malawi 2009).

Filemon⁴ was a 'local intellectual' (Barber 2008) and an active and vocal intermediary in colonial politics. He was also a teacher and 'tin-trunk' writer (Barber 2006: 2). In 1932, Filemon produced a work of critical importance to Tonga social, cultural and linguistic heritage: *Nthanu za Chitonga* (Stories in Chitonga) (Chirwa 1932). The only collection of Tonga folktales in Chitonga, and one of the only remaining Chitonga documents from the colonial period, *Nthanu za Chitonga* is a significant literary achievement of the colonial period and an important literary artefact. Drawing on archival work, this article suggests that *Nthanu za Chitonga* was written by Filemon as part of the ongoing political debate around the negotiation of British indirect rule and the constitution of the Atonga tribal council. A number of authors have shown in recent years the multiple dimensions of literature in the colonial African context, as part of nation building, patriotism, the production of new readerships, educational tools, transnational print networks, tin-trunk literacies, productions for 'particular moral and political ends' and more (Newell 2013: 99; see also Barber and Furniss 2006; Barber 2006; 2007; 2008; 2012; Davis *et al.* 2018; Hofmeyr *et al.* 2001; Newell 2009; 2016; Peterson and Hunter 2016). Building on these works, this article engages in a detailed exploration of one particular text, *Nthanu za Chitonga*, in order to argue for the deeply political role that some 'folk' literature was able to play in late colonial Africa. In this, the article adds to the multiplicity of avenues that African intellectuals mobilized in their engagements with colonial politics, showing how in one particular contestation of colonial governance, writing down oral folktales formed part of the matrix of local political action.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the article goes on to argue that, over time, the book became a politically symbolic artefact, one that has been re-mobilized in political practice.⁵ As the book disappeared from the local literary landscape, this literary artefact developed a rich and complex 'afterlife' (Peterson and Hunter 2016: 7), eventually coming to be seen by some as the 'Bible of the Tonga people'.⁶ In contextually examining *Nthanu za Chitonga*, I argue for the complex salience of even single African literary artefacts, tracing the emergence of a literary work within a turbulent landscape of colonial politics, where it shaped part of a broader imaginary of traditional practice, politics and identity, through its disappearance in the mid-twentieth century, to its contemporary, almost mythical, status when it re-emerges as a vehicle for the production of identity and as a tool for political practice.

Bandawe: 'a hotbed of Malawi intelligentsia'

In the early 1930s, the British Empire was moving from a system of direct rule towards a system of indirect rule. This system rested heavily on models of 'indigenous' forms of governance which assumed that most indigenous communities in Africa were constituted around deeply hierarchical and authoritarian chiefly structures (Mamdani 1996a; 1996b; Meyers 2013). In British Africa, the colonial government

⁴ Filemon Chirwa will be described as Filemon throughout the article as, first, Chirwa is a very common name in the region, and second, Filemon is how he is best known in the community.

⁵ This article is based on interviews and conversations drawn from eighteen months of fieldwork in the Bandawe area from October 2017 to March 2019, as well as archival documents from the UK and Malawi. The documents from the MNA were photographed and generously shared by Henry Dee.

⁶ Interview with Revd Mezuwa Banda, New Bandawe, 2018.

sought to institute indirect rule across a large number of its colonies and protectorates. This included the small, innocuous protectorate of Nyasaland. Nyasaland came under British rule in 1891 when a treatise between the Portuguese government and Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company defined the borders of the new protectorate and placed it under Foreign Office administration (McCracken 2012: 57). For much of its existence, the protectorate remained a small part of the empire, with a minute settler population and few revenue sources, and was left primarily under the authority and management of the many mission stations spread across its territories. By the 1930s, however, the colonial government sought to move governance away from mission control, which included a shift to indirect rule. As the colonial administration was working to institute its new system of rule across the protectorate, it encountered significant difficulties among a small number of communities living in the north of the country. This area was home to an ethno-linguistic group that defined itself as 'Tonga'; they lived to the south of Nkhata Bay and north of Nkhotakota, along the northern lakeshore of Lake Nyasa. Some Tonga districts were willing to elect Native Authorities, such as Kabunduli in the Nkhata Bay District.⁷ However, one district, the Chinteche District, proved particularly obstinate. Here, the colonial administrators concluded, it would be 'impossible' to institute a Native Authority, as the communities in the district could 'not agree who was the most senior headman' (van Velsen 1964: 22). These communities refused to select, and elect, a single chief as their Native Authority. Rather, the Tonga intellectuals in these communities proffered their own system of governance. They advocated for the creation of an Atonga tribal council (ATC), a political council consisting of thirty-two headmen. These headmen (and some headwomen) would all regularly meet as equals as a council, and, in what was depicted as typical Tonga fashion, would debate and argue the merits of policies until they came to an agreement (Power 2010: 37). In the act of calling for their own council-based system of rule, a small community of local intellectuals put forward an alternative form of indirect rule to the one advocated for by the colonial state – one that they argued aligned far more clearly and coherently with their extant 'traditional' modes of political engagement. This group of local intellectuals was being led, and enflamed, by one man in particular, Filemon Chirwa (d. 1961), considered by the government to be the primary architect behind the ATC.

At the centre of the political dissent that was causing the colonial administrators such headaches was an area called Bandawe,⁸ Filemon's home region. At the turn of the twentieth century, Bandawe produced such a concentration of politically active intellectuals that John McCracken, one of the pre-eminent historians of Malawi, described it as a 'hotbed of Malawian intelligentsia'. It produced many of 'the leading political participants' within the colonial regime in the first half of the twentieth

⁷ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Proceedings in a meeting of chiefs of the West Nyasa District held at Chinteche 4/5/6 June 1932'.

⁸ It is not precisely clear in which village Filemon was born, therefore the broader term 'Bandawe area', which is mentioned as his home in colonial texts, is given here. Bandawe was not a village, but rather the name the missionaries gave to their mission station. Much of the old 'Bandawe area' currently falls under the leadership of present-day traditional authority Malenga Mzoma, particularly the villages of Mchaya, Chituka and Kamwala. There is also an adjacent 'New Bandawe', which is where the mission station moved in later years.

century (McCracken 1977: 83, 75). Bandawe had played a significant role in Malawi's early mission and colonial history, from being the site of some of the last remaining independent Tonga villages during the Ngoni conquests of northern Malawi to being visited by David Livingstone in 1861 as he journeyed around Lake Nyasa (McCracken 1977; 2012; van Velsen 1959; 1962).

In 1881, the site became an important part of the country's mission history when it was chosen by Dr Robert Laws as the location for the Livingstonia Mission, 'one of the most important of the Christian missions introduced into Central Africa in the late nineteenth century' (McCracken 1977: vii). Spearheaded by Laws, an idealistic and highly motivated United Presbyterian missionary from Scotland, the mission station at Bandawe was the second attempt by the missionaries of the Free Church of Scotland to establish a mission station in the country, after a number of malarial deaths had forced them to abandon their first station at Cape Maclear (Livingstone 1921; McCracken 1977). For thirteen years, Bandawe was the Livingstonia Mission's headquarters and the centre of missionary activity in northern Malawi. The mission set up schools, centres for trade learning and churches. In 1894, after numerous deaths from malaria, the missionaries moved once again, this time higher up and further north into the Nyika Plateau, to escape the heat and mosquitos. There they founded the present-day Livingstonia Mission, whose mission station and advanced education institute, the Overtoun Institute, became a hub for intellectual and political activity in East Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McCracken 2012).

Living in Bandawe, Filemon and his brother Yuraia were quickly drawn into the ambit of the Livingstonia Mission and its work. In 1881, Yuraia and Filemon were among the earliest pupils to attend the newly minted mission school built just down the road from their home (Glagow 2006: 73). After completing their primary education there, they were among the first Malawians to go on to secondary schooling at the Overtoun Institute. Yuraia quickly became Robert Law's right-hand man, guiding him across the country and helping him found the Livingstonia Mission at Khondowe (Livingstone 1921: 273). Bright, ambitious and well connected through his brother, Filemon did well at the mission schools and within the mission structures, rising quickly within the ranks and becoming a leading figure in his community, as school inspector, headteacher, 'leading trader' and church elder (McCracken 1977: 252; Mphande 2014: 144; Sinclair 2003: 35). In his role as part of the intellectual elite, Filemon also acted as one of the 'local intermediaries' upon which so much of the colonial system was based, bridging the gap between colonial and local practices and knowledge (McCracken 1977: 83). In 1914, for example, he sat on the Charms and Superstitions Committee of the Livingstonia presbytery and in 1920 he helped found the West Nyasa Native Association, where he was elected as its first secretary (Hokkanen 2007: 74; McCracken 1977: 314). Despite his enthusiastic political activity, Filemon was not a firebrand of local politics; rather, he is described as a 'moderate accommodationist' who sought a more conventional and cooperative line in relation to the colonial authorities (McCracken 1977: 315). His 'accommodationist' stance did not, however, prevent him from being an astute local political actor who tried in numerous ways to gain influence over how his society was being shaped in the process of colonization.

Highly educated, proficient in English and politically active, Filemon was firmly embedded in the class of local 'literate elites' who were 'active agents in the making and remaking of their colonial worlds' (Newell 2013: 1). His home of Bandawe was a particularly fervent locus of intellectual activity that maintained close connections to the Livingstonia Mission's educational institutes. Even after the mission moved its headquarters to Livingstonia, the Bandawe area, and the Tonga people who lived in it, remained core to the mission's activities and were significantly over-represented in its learning institutions. In 1921, the Bandawe area alone, although geographically minute, provided 35 per cent of the full-time students at the institute and over 70 per cent of those in the upper school (McCracken 1977: 150). Equipped with the tools of their education, these Tonga intellectuals strove to engage with the colonial government and administration in order to shape the destiny, not only of their own homeland, but of Nyasaland as a whole. An exceptionally large number of the 'counter-subjects' (Collins and Blot 2003: 122) of the late colonial and early independence period in Nyasaland, who used their education to counter the colonial state and to create identities that incorporated indigenous meanings into colonial discourses that were in opposition to the colonial order, were Tonga intellectuals.⁹ As one colonial commentator, Sir Robert Bell, exclaimed in his report of 1939, the 'Atonga' were seen as 'the most progressive tribe in the country, [equipped with] skill and intelligence'.¹⁰ This was the intellectual ground that nurtured the emergence of the ATC and helped Filemon become an important counter-subject in his own right when he championed the creation of this council.

Challenging rule: the Atonga tribal council

In 1931, H. G. Foulger, the district commissioner (DC) in charge of facilitating the move to indirect rule in the Chinteché District, was tasked with finding a system of rule that would be consented to by all the communities in the area. In order to establish what this rule should look like and who should carry the title of Native Authority within it, the DC called Filemon Chirwa and chiefs Chiweyu, Gulu and Mejere to his office to tell him what the history, customs and traditions of their people were.¹¹ It was at this meeting that Filemon told DC Foulger that the Tonga did not have traditional paramount chiefs in the way the Native Authorities Ordinance expected. Rather, Filemon argued, the traditional form of governance in the area had been one of a 'clanship' system of distributed power. It would be such a system

⁹ These included: Elliot Kamwana (1872–1956), the founder of the Watch Tower movement in Malawi, forerunner of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and a thorn in the colonial government's side (Donati 2011; Mphande 2009); Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi (1869/70–after 1940) from Chinteché, a fellow early founder of a separatist church, the Blackman's Church of Africa, and very prominent early intellectual (MacDonald 1970; Ross 2013: 103); Clements Kadalie (1896–1951) from Chifira in Bandawe, a famous intellectual who founded the Industrial and Commercial Union in South Africa (Dee 2020); and Manowa Chirwa, Orton Chirwa, Thamar Dillon Banda and Kanyama Chieme, who played pivotal roles in the formation of what was to become the Malawi Congress Party, the independence party of the country (Power 2010: 41–2).

¹⁰ National Archives Kew (NA) CO 525/183/1, 'Dispatch from Secretary of State for Colonies to Governor', extract from Sir R. Bell's report (1939).

¹¹ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Minutes of a meeting of the Atonga chiefs of sections 3, 4, 6 and 7. Held at Chinteché on 3rd March 1933'.

that would need to be put forward for indirect rule, he said, 'to allow for the peculiarities of the Atonga'.¹² It was Filemon, therefore, who was the 'originator of the idea'¹³ of a council of chiefs as the preferred system of rule for these Tonga communities.¹⁴ The colonial government, however, rejected this system as untenable. Instead, they called a large meeting in June 1932 of all Tonga chiefs, and a number of Tonga intellectuals, at which the fate and future of Tonga politics were to be decided.

The new DC after Foulger, John O'Brien, opened this three-day meeting with a highly paternalist sermon on the history of the Tonga people. In his sermon, O'Brien informed the gathered chiefs that, prior to being conquered by the Ngoni and then revolting against them, the Tonga had all submitted to a small handful of paramount chiefs. O'Brien concluded his speech by triumphantly stating: '[Y]ou [Tonga] are in fact one people. You are not different from any others. When you state you have no chiefs you bring ridicule upon yourselves.'¹⁵ Having rejected Filemon's presentation of Tonga history, O'Brien offered an alternative take, one that aligned far more clearly with the colonial government's desires. In his speech, O'Brien suggested that the gathered communities believed they did not have a Native Authority only because there was a 'Mission Teacher [Filemon] going about putting foolish ideas into the heads of people'.¹⁶ The whole affair, the DC claimed, suffered from 'undue interference by educated natives [which] was bound to bring trouble'.¹⁷ In communications with the colonial government, O'Brien did not hide his enormous frustration at the refusal of certain Tonga communities to accept a system of Native Authority rule, complaining bitterly that the Tonga were 'difficult of management'. A 'people not organised tribally', they were 'reduced to a state of individualism . . . a degenerated heterogenous rabble difficult to handle'.¹⁸

Part of what made these communities 'difficult to handle' was that the role of the Tonga headman or chief was 'antithetical' to the general colonial concept of a headman (van Velsen 1964: 6). As Jaap van Velsen, an anthropologist working in the Bandawe area in the early 1950s, noted, 'among the Tonga power and authority are diffused', and 'although there are chiefs (*mafumu*, sing. *fumu*) with hereditary titles, their constitutional position is ill-defined and traditionally the office lacks sanction' (*ibid.*: 2, 7). Chiefs were not paragons of authority and power, but rather people who gave counsel and helped guide discussions at *mphalas*.¹⁹ They were not infrequently ignored, harangued or dismissed by their people, as they continue to be

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ MNA RMC, S43/1/14/1, 'Atonga - re-organisation of tribal council 1941-1948', Acting PC to Chief Secretary, 7 October 1945.

¹⁴ Filemon himself insisted that after this meeting he had gone around the villages speaking with chiefs and having meetings with community members, and that a council of chiefs was voted on by the majority as the preferred system of rule.

¹⁵ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Proceedings in a meeting of chiefs of the West Nyasa District held at Chinteche on 4th 5th 6th June 1932'.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Letter from DC Chinteche to PC Northern Province, 9th June 1932', 1 March 1932.

¹⁹ These are traditional courts and/or places where men meet.

to this day.²⁰ For the colonial administration, these political structures seemed incomprehensible and illogical²¹ and made ‘the Tonga political system difficult to handle by and to incorporate into the Administrative system’ (*ibid.*: 6; see also Power 2010).

It was on the basis of these chiefly relations that Filemon laid much of his claim for an ATC. While many in the community sided with Filemon’s interpretation of Tonga history and customs, some chiefs, in particular those who were at the time benefiting from the colonial government’s DANO system, which gave them paramount powers, vehemently objected to Filemon’s arguments and sided with those of the DC. The most vocal of these was Chief Gulu. Gulu spoke out frequently, and vociferously, against Filemon, complaining about, for example, ‘much agitation which had been carried out in the past and was reported still to be carried on by Philimon Chirwa and others who were responsible for starting the Clan system’.²² Gulu accused Filemon of deceitful politicking behind closed doors and of going about the region turning people against the authority of their chiefs for his own interest. ‘Education is a good thing,’ Gulu proclaimed, ‘but because a man was clever at book learning it did not mean that he knew better than the elders of the people and it was a bad thing when men who had been educated make trouble between the chiefs and the people and tried to set themselves up over the chiefs and get power in their own hands.’²³ Filemon vehemently denied any desire to get power or to set himself up as a chief and claimed to be working only in the interests of those who called on him to help them. However, despite Filemon’s claims that he was working merely in the interests of others, there is some indication that he repeatedly sought a place on the ATC. In 1935, and then again in 1944, a request was put forward by members of the ATC to have ‘some representative of the educated element’ of society sit on the council. This representative was understood by the colonial government to ‘undoubtedly’ mean ‘Philemon Chirwa, [who] was formerly a member of the District Council and has influenced political affairs in the District very considerably. His name is anathema to the former Principal Headmen Mkumbira, Mnakhambira, Gulu and Marenga who raged at him as being to a large extent responsible for the [other] headmen breaking away from their leadership.’²⁴ Other intellectuals at the time were also against the political manoeuvring they believed Filemon to be undertaking. Yesaya Zerenji Mwasi, for example, who was a supporter of the paramount position of Chief Marenga, argued that Filemon’s claims for chiefly equality were ‘fraudulently’ promoting ‘inferior clans’ to positions of parity with the superior clans, whereas Ernest Alexander Muwamba argued that Chief Chiweyu had a clear claim to paramount chieftaincy of the Tonga (McCracken 1977: 339). It was within this context of intense and longstanding disputes around leadership and authority in the region

²⁰ There is a Tonga saying, still common today, which goes, ‘*Nde fumu ndija*’ (I am a chief on my own), meaning that each person is their own chief, and therefore does not need to subjugate themselves excessively to any other.

²¹ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, ‘Concerning the Tonga tribal council 1930–1944. The ATC and rebels’.

²² MNA RMC, 4.6-812/470, ‘Minutes of a meeting of the Atonga chiefs of sections 3, 4, 6 and 7 held at Chinteche on 3rd March 1933’.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, Letter, 5 March 1935, ‘Council of Atonga tribal chiefs’ from DC Chinteche to PC Northern Province, C. 15/1935.

that Filemon was trying to stake his own claim for a more diffused and distributed governance structure.

What was crucial in these debates was the colonial government's insistence on the importance of 'history', 'tradition' and 'customs' in their decision-making processes around indirect rule. Making recourse to 'custom' or 'traditional' rule was a key mechanism used across British Africa to insist on the rule of Native Authorities who were couched as traditional chiefs (Mamdani 1996b; Mantena 2010). The period of change towards indirect rule was one in which the colonial administration wanted to look like they were giving people more agency and sovereignty in determining the shape of their future local government structures based on their 'traditions' and 'cultures'. For this reason, O'Brien insisted that the government would not do anything 'which was not compatible with the History and Customs of the Tonga People'²⁵ or 'contrary to the History and Tradition' of the people and would not accept any suggestions that were 'contrary to the traditions of the tribe'.²⁶ O'Brien, therefore, made clear that any argument for or against a particular form of rule had to embed itself in a convincing 'history' of local traditions and customs.

In light of this, one of the key arguments Filemon put forward for the creation of the ATC was that it would restore "'traditional" Tonga power-sharing' methods, based on dispute and debate (Power 2010: 38). He told DC O'Brien in 1933 that the 'new system' of governance through a council was 'according to old Atonga custom'.²⁷ Filemon claimed that in the 'traditional' non-hierarchical governance structures of Tonga communities, issues were decided through councils, *mphala*, where all parties concerned would gather to discuss their grievances, argue their case and hear advice. The *mphala*, as a kind of traditional court and time and place of meeting, played a crucial role in both the political practice and the political imaginary of the time. For Filemon, the ATC was an extension of this idea, a larger *mphala*, where all the Tonga *mafumu* (chiefs) could gather to discuss the political work of the colonial administration. Here, governance happened in a reasonably egalitarian space (although still heavily gendered towards male dominance), where all the chiefly representatives of various Tonga communities would come together to debate political policy and action. Indirect rule, as the British were trying to institute it, constituted a form of authoritarian and sometimes quasi-dictatorial leadership based on the imagined assumption of 'tribal' groups led by single chiefly authorities (Mamdani 1996b). The council system that some of the Tonga were advocating for was a push back against the centralized, authoritarian politics the British were trying to institute, opting for a more decentralized and participatory form of governance. The fact that the DC so heavily relied on 'history and tradition' to inform his decisions on the future of local government meant that those who were able to control this narrative would wield enormous influence. Whoever could, therefore, dictate the terms of the narrative of Tonga 'history' and 'traditions' would also ultimately be able to dictate the

²⁵ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Proceedings in a meeting held at Kanyenda and attended by chiefs and village headmen of that section, 3rd August 1932'.

²⁶ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Meeting consisting of all village headmen of Mankhambira's section re-assembled at 2 p.m. on the 13th of July 1932 to discuss the reorganisation of their chieftainships'.

²⁷ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/4701, 'Minutes of a meeting of the Atonga chiefs of sections 3, 4, 6 and 7 held at Chinteche on 3rd March 1933'.

terms of the colonial political structures of the community. Within colonial rubrics, those who were able to communicate and write in English – and, even better, able to print in the language – were able to play a significant role in ‘inventing’ traditions and political lineages that could exert great influence not only at the time but also for generations to come. The stakes in the ‘invention of tradition’ in the ‘colonial encounter’ were, therefore, incredibly high (Ranger 2012 [1983]: 212).

Capturing oral literature, making politics

It was during the height of the political manoeuvring to institute and formalize the ATC in 1931–32 that Filemon Chirwa wrote his seminal book, *Nthanu za Chitonga* (Stories in Chitonga).²⁸ One hundred and twenty pages long, *Nthanu za Chitonga* contains thirty-three stories or tales, such as *Wajinangiye wenecho* (They betray themselves), *Mbawa ndi Nyalubwe* (Antelope and Leopard) and *Mo Kalulu wabayiyanga nyama* (How the Hare hunted many animals), as well as a list of twenty-seven proverbs or sayings at the end.²⁹ As the only Chitonga-language collection of Tonga *nthanu* ever published, and perhaps the oldest remaining publication in Chitonga, *Nthanu za Chitonga* is an important literary artefact.³⁰ As will be argued here, it was also a literary intervention into the political conflicts happening at the time of its publication.

Printed by the Livingstonia Mission Press and published in 1932, *Nthanu za Chitonga* was published as a textbook for the mission’s primary teaching curriculum. At the time, the majority of the education taking place in Nyasaland was under the auspices of the missionaries and mission stations who divided schools into three teaching levels: vernacular, lower middle and upper middle (the latter two taught in English) (Kayambazinthu 1999: 41). The Scottish missions placed firm emphasis on the importance of local-language education, believing that it was crucial for students to learn to read and write in their own tongue.³¹

As part of their endeavour to promote literacy through the vernacular, the missions produced a number of texts in vernacular languages, ‘often working closely with African intellectuals, on the transcription of dialects into written languages and the provision of translations of appropriate texts’ (McCracken 2012: 113; see also Brackett

²⁸ *Nthanu za Chitonga* is the only work of Filemon’s that was published. Seeming to attempt to position himself as an African ‘amateur historian’ (Peterson and Macola 2009: 3), he also wrote down a short history of his people. However, this history did not achieve the success of *Nthanu za Chitonga*; it was never published and has remained a ‘tin-trunk text’ (Barber 2006: 2) in the family’s personal possession (Mphande 2014: 144). Chitonga is the language spoken by people in Malawi who are Tonga (it is not the same as Zambian Tonga).

²⁹ Other stories include *Mbunu yaku Pundu* (The hyena’s greed), *Ubwezi* (Friendship), *Mkosanu ndi Mphepho* (The son-in-law and the wind) and *Wajinangiye Wenecho* (You can only blame yourself).

³⁰ In 2011, the late David Mphande, a leading twenty-first-century Tonga intellectual, published *Nthanthi za Chitonga* (Sayings or small stories in Chitonga). A large number of these were taken from Filemon’s book. In 2014, he published his seminal work *Oral Literature and Moral Education Among the Lakeside Tonga of Northern Malawi*. In this book he reproduces forty Tonga tales, ten of which are direct translations from Filemon’s book. While the work is an extremely important collection of Tonga oral literature, it is intended as an academic piece and is published in English.

³¹ The vernaculars taught in the mission schools in the north were Nyanja, Yao, Tumbuka and Tonga, but by 1914 Tumbuka had gained linguistic dominance in the region through mission imposition and was therefore taught in all schools, although ‘the Tonga ... continued to use their own language’ (Kayambazinthu 1999: 41).

and Wrong 1934).³² Among this proliferation of local-language literature, the missions also printed three textbooks in Chitonga for use in the school curriculum: *Mcapu wa Chitonga* (Faster in Chitonga, a book of proverbs), *Chiswamasangu* (The Opener of the Way, a book about the life of David Livingstone) and *Nthanu za Chitonga* (Mphande 2014: 328).

It was within the framework of this vernacular- and local knowledge-based didactic orientation of the missionaries that Filemon was called upon to write his book. As one of the few written texts in the language, the book played multiple roles. It was, on the one hand, a teaching tool, a means through which Chitonga-speaking children could learn and practise literacy in their mother tongue. As the missionaries themselves insisted, this was crucial both for learning literacy and for allowing people to learn the 'language [that] is their life'.³³ On the other hand, the book was not only a teaching tool for literacy, but also a means through which to teach the children their history and heritage, and, importantly, to impart the moral values and lessons of their community. Added to this, as is made clear in Filemon's introduction below, it was also designed to teach children the modes of thinking and arguing and the moral codes that he considered central to Tonga political life. Finally, the book also acted as a written collection of oral history for posterity.

Already imbued with a multiplicity of roles, the book had one further part to play – and one that was perhaps more subtle but hugely important to its author. Viewed within the context of the debates circulating at the time around the ATC, we can see how the book was also an interjection into a particular political moment, a moment when Filemon was finding himself in conflict with both the colonial administration and the supporters of Tonga chiefs who resisted the forming of the ATC. When arguing for the ATC, Filemon faced a colonial body that believed that the best method of indirect rule for its subjects would be one that reflected an imagined version of 'traditional' practices. As DC O'Brien had said, the government would not do anything that was 'contrary to the History and Tradition' of the Tonga people. Filemon, for his part, insisted that the method of rule propagated by the ATC was the most closely aligned with traditional Tonga modes of rule – rule that was based on debate and discussion among a large number of chiefs at local councils, called *mphalas*. In the introduction to his book, we can see Filemon mobilizing his folktale collection to repeat, reiterate and perhaps help reify this claim.

Filemon writes:

Buku lenili Nthanu za Chitonga lasimbikiya ahurwa ndi asungwana wa masukulu gha mu uTonga . . .

This book *Nthanu za Chitonga* is being taught to boys and girls in the schools of the Tonga. The author of this book hopes that those who read this book will

³² The Livingstonia Mission produced books in twelve vernacular languages: Nyanja, Shisya, Wanda, Namwanga, Henga, Poka, Nkhonde, Yao, Ngoni, Tumbuka, Wemba and Tonga (Mwiyeriwa 1978: 35).

³³ The language politics of Malawi have a long and complex history, with a constant oscillation between a multiplicity of languages and a drive for the unification of a national language (see Kamwendo 2002; Kishindo 1998; Vail 1978). It has been argued that in Malawi the question of language has been a core constituent in the creation of 'tribal' identities and the production of regionalism and 'tribal' divisions in the country (Vail 1978).

know and understand well [*azamziwa ndi kuvwa umampha*] all *nthanu* explained, that they were told a long time ago, with our forefathers, who also found these stories from a very long time ago. Their *nthanu* were teaching people to settle disputes/make closing arguments and to find solutions through counsel and well-made points [*kutseka makani ndi kubowozga fundu zau*]. Boys and girls, of the year of nowadays, they must learn these *nthanu* with energy and happiness, and examine/analyse critically [*kusanda*] every *nthanu* they read. Some *nthanu* are short stories; in the way they are written the book hopes that all the boys and girls should lust after learning [*aziwunukiyenge kuzisambira*]. At the end of the book the stories have been described in short form [proverbs and sayings]. These small stories, they have their lessons.³⁴

In this preface, Filemon performs numerous manoeuvres. First, he connects the stories to the forefathers and to the most ancient history of the Tonga people ‘from a very long time ago’. He then suggests that the role *nthanu* played for these forefathers, and should continue to play for the new generation, was to teach people how to settle disputes through argument and how to find solutions through counsel and well-made points (debate). In the introduction to his school textbook, Filemon emphasizes as central to Tonga thinking and practice the role of debate, discussion, dispute settlement and counsel. Published at precisely the time when the ATC was being formed, we can surmise that Filemon aimed for his book to do more than just be a textbook for children, or even an anthology for posterity. Filemon’s book was also a political act, one that advanced the idea that debate, discussion and counsel were absolutely fundamental to Tonga political life.

This is enforced by Filemon’s choice for the first *nthanu* of his book. The book opens with the story of ‘*Mbawa ndi Nyalubwe*’,³⁵ Leopard and Antelope. In this story, Leopard and Antelope have a disagreement about the ownership of goats. Antelope’s female goat bears many kids by Leopard’s male goat. Leopard lays claim to the kids, but Antelope believes they belong to him. The disagreement is brought to the *mphala* (court) for discussion, where clever *Kalulu* (Hare) eventually settles the dispute. What Filemon opens his book with is essentially a story of a case being taken to the *mphala*, where the chiefs and wise members of the community have to make a decision about the case, through discussion, debate and ‘well-made points’. With this book, printed at the height of the debates leading up to the creation of the ATC, Filemon creates a written account of Tonga ‘traditions’, a textual intervention that puts in print the type of Tonga tradition and custom which he argues underpin the rationale of the ATC.

Although *Nthanu za Chitonga* opens with a story about a dispute being settled at an *mphala*, the book does not focus on tales of a strictly political nature. Many of the other stories in the book deal with various questions of obedience, respect, deceit or greed, and other such moral and social questions. A number of the stories have their lesson, as understood by Filemon, explicitly written out at the end. For example, ‘obey the advice from your parents’, ‘being jealous of your friend is bad’, ‘don’t

³⁴ Translated with James Mpanda.

³⁵ Translated with James Mpanda and Nikolas Mwakasula.

mistreat those who help you' and 'don't cheat a friend'.³⁶ In explicitly writing down these lessons, Filemon removed from many stories a key feature of oral literature – namely, that its meanings are not static and fixed but can be altered, reimagined and discussed by each speaker and in each sitting (see, for example, Newell 2013; Finnegan 1970). While many of the stories are presented as coming from the community, it is likely that Filemon, as a religious leader and man of local importance, sought not only to reify certain terms of political practice, but also to imbue the work, and thus his community, with his own moral inclinations.

With almost no texts being printed in Chitonga, every textual recording of supposed Tonga norms was significant. This was coupled with the weight of textual recordings per se in the colonial world. Texts, textuality and paper were core constituents of how the British Empire functioned, dominated and ruled (see Ballantyne 2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Hawkins 2002; Stoler 2002; 2008). Within the broader structures of this colonial 'world of paper' (Ballantyne 2011: 234), a world that was 'obsessed with paperwork' (Newell 2009: 10), being able to produce literary works and to intercede in debates in written form lent the writer and their arguments significant power and clout (see also Barber 2006; Newell 2006). As Leroy Vail describes in his work on language and ethnicity, this power of words was widely recognized by others in Nyasaland. For example, a handful of Livingstonia Mission-trained intellectual elites 'who worshipped the printed word', such as the Tumbuka scholar Saulous Nyirenda and the Tonga intellectual Edward Manda, wrote English versions of local oral histories, precisely in order to intervene in and steer leadership contestations among Tumbuka communities (see Vail 1978). In writing down his version of Tonga traditions and customs, with an introduction that made clear what he felt was crucial in the practice of these customs, Filemon worked within this landscape of literary politics, subtly bringing the weight of paper and the power of words into play in the turbulent and contested political landscape he was trying to manipulate. *Nthanu za Chitonga* was never mobilized as an explicit or direct intervention in the political landscape. Rather, much like the Southern African praise poetry analysed by Vail and White, it acted as an indirect literary accompaniment to political engagement (see Vail and White 1991).

Filemon's careful political manoeuvring worked, and, despite contention from some chiefs and intellectuals, and resistance from the government, his advocacy for the tribal council was effective. When the Native Authority Act was declared in 1933, the Tonga were given a special dispensation to have their own form of governance with the ATC. The ATC was a unique experiment in alternative forms of indirect rule constituted and determined by the local communities themselves. However, its format, based on communal discussion in gatherings of up to thirty-two chiefs, meant that it was neither as easy to manage for the colonial administration as individual Native Authorities, nor as efficient in the quick turnover of law and order. The fault lines of tension that had been there at the inception of the council also festered

³⁶ Translated with Blessing Kamoza Banda and Joseph Nduna. I was told that the stories are written in older Chitonga, which means that some of the words and grammatical constructions are harder for younger people to understand. For older community members, such as Banda and Nduna, this did not pose much of an issue. Banda and Nduna, with my support, are currently in the process of producing a full translation of the book.

over the years, resulting in many internal fractures. By the early 1940s, the Chintech DC was sending repeated messages to the provincial commissioner about the Northern Province asking him to disband the council.³⁷ By 1948, the internal tensions of the council and the colonial administration's frustration with its functioning led to it being abolished. Nonetheless, Filemon's political work had resulted in an alternative political formation of indirect rule that lasted for almost a decade and a half.

'That is a political book': a book disappears

As a written work, *Nthanu za Chitonga* had a longer life than Filemon's political project of the ATC. It seems to have remained part of the school curriculum even past his death in 1961. Nonetheless, like his political work, his intellectual work was to receive a devastating blow. With the end of British occupation in 1963 and the rise of Malawi's independent government under Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda came the ultimate demise of *Nthanu za Chitonga*. Banda, an autocrat in the making, proclaimed that he wished to create a new Malawi, free of the regional infighting that had marked the country during the colonial period (Vail and White 1989). One result of this regionalism was a growing feeling of resentment that the extensive missionary presence in the north, with their concomitant educational institutes, meant that the peoples from the north – the Tumbuka, Ngoni and Tonga – were being given favoured political and educational positions (Chirwa 1998). The difference in education, and the resulting difference in political and academic opportunities for those from the north during the colonial period, frustrated the Chewa majority of the south and central regions enough that they engaged in public efforts to put pressure on Banda to 'redress the balance in favour of their own ethnic group' (Kamwendo 2002: 146).

When Banda came to power in 1964, he chose to appease his Chewa constituencies and counter the growing regionalism in the country by unifying the nation under a Chewa identity as metonymic for a Malawian identity (Kamwendo 2002: 144). This process of 'Chewanization' (Kishindo 1998: 256) had a profound impact on the country's school systems. Under Banda's new national curriculum, all vernacular languages other than Chichewa were removed from the school syllabus and banned from use in schools, leaving only Chichewa and English as languages of instruction (Kamwendo 2002: 146). As a result, vernacular books such as *Nthanu za Chitonga* were pulled from the school curriculum and printing of them ceased. The materiality of the book as object (Hofmeyr *et al.* 2001) sealed its fate, as, over time, the last copies succumbed to the ravages of the local climate, and so the book disappeared from Tonga homes and communities.

Despite the fact that – or perhaps because – *Nthanu za Chitonga* disappeared from everyday use, the legacy of Filemon's work remains alive in the region to this day – as does a complex political narrative that has been built around its disappearance. Although very few copies are in circulation, many villagers in Bandawe, and beyond, know of the book, and many lament its loss. Some claim that with the loss of the book went 'the wisdom of the Tonga people'.³⁸ Two young men who help run the local cultural centre claimed that Banda took the book from the Tonga people because he was

³⁷ MNA RMC, 4.6-812/470, 'Letter from the DC to the PC Northern Province', 21 August 1944, 2/32 A.

³⁸ Interview with Elliam C., Mchaya, 2017.

afraid that ‘it would make the Tonga too clever’, and then they would rise up against him. The younger of the two explained that this was because ‘if you read it, you can become a politician; [it is] a very powerful book . . . that is a *political* book’.³⁹ An old woman living in Bandawe argued that ‘Dr Banda, he saw that “Tonga people they are very clever, they are competing with me, what can I do? Oh, I better frustrate them. How can I frustrate them? By stopping *Nthanu za Chitonga*.”’⁴⁰ The sentiment that ‘Kamuzu took [Chitonga] away and forced Chichewa on people’⁴¹ was a powerful perception in the villages around present-day Bandawe,⁴² and Banda’s fear that the book might make the Tonga political or too clever was seen as a crucial reason why he would want to ‘take it away’. Wrapped into this reasoning is a complex history of marginalization of the northern Malawian ethno-linguistic groups, particularly in the post-independence period. During Banda’s regime, many living in the north of Malawi felt that the regime unfairly discriminated against them, a sentiment born of Banda’s open hostility to politicians from the northern regions and an enactment of policies that often ended up disadvantaging northerners (Chirwa 1998: 59; Vail 1978; Vail and White 1989). The disappearance of a book perceived to contain important oral literature and history – even, by some, to contain ‘Tonga wisdom’ – is rendered through the lens of a history of marginalization in which Filemon Chirwa’s book becomes the symbolic representation of an intellectual downfall, from the height of Tonga political activity in the late colonial period to the perceived persecution of Tonga politicians and intellectuals under the Banda regime. With the book, these feelings of frustration, marginalization and decline find symbolic expression through the removal of a key piece of local literature.

The feelings of marginalization, and the need to assert regional political identity, were not, however, confined to the Banda era alone. After the end of Banda’s rule, the enforced unification of the country under Chewa identity began to fray and regionalism began to emerge once again as a powerful political dynamic (Kishindo 1998: 252; Phiri and Ross 1998; Power 2010). One outcome of this is the emergence of ethno-linguistic heritage groups such as the Lomwe Heritage Group and the Chichewa Heritage Group, as well as the Tonga Heritage Foundation, now called *Mudawuku wa Tonga* (Culture of the Tonga). In 2007, Kachere Press, a small press in Blantyre, republished *Nthanu za Chitonga* as part of its series that reintroduces old Malawian texts into the country (Chirwa 2007). The book was enthusiastically received by Tonga-speaking elites and the newly established Tonga Heritage Foundation. One of *Mudawuku wa Tonga*’s founders and its chairperson, the Reverend Mezuwa Banda, said of the book:

[I]f you read that book, you would understand Tonga philosophy, and Tonga way of life. That’s the best that has come among the Tonga people. If you ask any Tonga person, they would really yearn for that book. That’s where the wisdom of the Tonga is. That book is trying to make you as a Tonga think critically . . . I don’t know how I can explain it, but I’m saying probably something

³⁹ Conversation with James C. and James M., Bandawe, 2018, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Interview with Ambuya (Elder) Gonthi, Kamwala, 2018.

⁴¹ Conversation with Ambuya (Elder) Martha, Chituka, 2019.

⁴² Specifically, the villages of New Bandawe, Mchaya, Chituka, Chifira and Kamwala.

like a Bible of the Tonga people, religious or non-religious. If you read that book you find a road map, you find it develops in you critical thinking. [When the book disappeared] we were robbed of our way of life . . . that literature was part of our blood and spirit.⁴³

Banda's words articulate the enormous symbolic power the book has accrued since its writing. It has come to be equated with one of the most powerfully sacred texts – the Bible. For Banda, an ordained reverend for whom the Bible is a crucial text in his life, to compare *Nthanu za Chitonga* with the Bible shows how far the book has gone beyond simply being a collection of oral literature. For some in the Tonga communities from which it emerged, *Nthanu za Chitonga*, as one of the few older texts in Chitonga remaining, has become akin to a local sacred text. Unfortunately, the hefty price tag of 5,000 kwacha (£5) means that very few villagers can afford to buy a copy.

Nonetheless, engaged attempts are made to get hold of copies. The current Chief Chimbano, who is chief over the old Bandawe area where Laws set up his mission station, was, for example, able to get a copy of the book through a visiting Canadian researcher, who sent him a PDF copy of a scan held in Edinburgh University's library. In the hands of Chimbano, the book once again became a political tool used to enact a political interjection. Chimbano claimed that he used the book as an aid for disputes and arguments, helping him to understand how better to engage in debates at *mphala*. For Chimbano, the book was a teaching tool that showed him how to deal with conflicts that arise in the village, how to act as a chief and how to engage in political practice when navigating local disputes. 'Some people use the Bible' to guide them, 'some *nthanu*', he said.⁴⁴

In 2018, Chimbano brought his PDF copy of the book to a council meeting of all the local chiefs of the area. At this meeting, when the other chiefs were discussing the many problems they were facing in their villages, Chimbano brandished his copy of *Nthanu za Chitonga* and told the chiefs that this was what they needed in order to help them solve their problems. He then explained to the chiefs how they could use the book in deliberations and how it would help them to have 'cultural wisdom'.⁴⁵ Chimbano was actively trying to get hold of more copies of *Nthanu za Chitonga* to distribute in his community and to his fellow chiefs as he believed the book was important 'to have cultural wisdom' and 'would teach people how to handle things'.⁴⁶

Through people such as Chimbano, some of Filemon's original vision of the relationship between the book and the continuation of the practice of debate at *mphala* is re-actualized. In the hands of contemporary chiefs, Filemon's book once again becomes a piece of political literature, even doing some of the work that Filemon had intended of continuing to show Tonga people his version of their heritage of debate and discussion.

⁴³ Interview with Revd Mezuwa Banda, New Bandawe, 2018.

⁴⁴ Interview with Chief Chimbano, Mchaya, 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Collections of so-called children's stories are not generally examined as pieces of political literature or as quasi-Bibles, yet with *Nthanu za Chitonga* we have an example of how a collection of stories ostensibly for children becomes one of the core texts that emerges in a period of profound political activity and carries powerful symbolic resonance across the centuries. Written within the context of imperial strategies of rule that encouraged regional language production – a production which in Malawi was later quashed under nationalism – the book suggests that the logics of empire allowed for certain literary possibilities that were later foreclosed with the rise of nationalism. Understood within the emergence of its local political context, *Nthanu za Chitonga* can be seen as an astute literary intervention at a key political moment – a conscious moment of textual creation of 'tradition' mobilized in order to push a particular political agenda within the colonial 'world of paper'.

While Filemon's work was far more than a 'tin-trunk text', as it was part of the official Tonga school curriculum for decades, it was part of a 'new way of relating to the world of officialdom' (Barber 2006: 4). Through his book, Filemon was situating the political relationship of his community against the order of officialdom to which they were being subjected – not only by putting traditions down on paper, but also by presenting those traditions in such a way that they underscored a new political relationship to colonial indirect rule. Barber has eloquently shown how practising and participating in literacy not only showed the 'civic aspirations' of local intellectual elites, but also highlighted their capacity to participate politically in the colonial state (*ibid.*; see also Newell 2006; 2009). With his work, Filemon not only tapped into this relationship between literacy and political participation, but also used his literate intervention as a clear act of political statement. Filemon's work also elegantly tackled a further insidious product of the colonial connection between literacy and political capacity – the colonial claim that Africans had no literature and therefore no 'civilised values' (Barber 2006: 13). Filemon not only was an active creator of African literature, but through his book he used the claim to local literature (*nthanu*) as a statement about the nature of the local culture (one of debate and egalitarian politics), which would thereby influence the possibilities of local political formations within the colonial state's apparatus.

But texts have 'afterlives' (Peterson and Hunter 2016: 7), and in its afterlife *Nthanu za Chitonga* took on a life of its own that went far beyond the colonial politics of the ATC. It became the imagined depository of the 'wisdom of the Tonga', it became 'a Bible of the Tonga people', it became a text that symbolized both the loss of language and heritage through the violence of colonial occupation and its accompanying school system, and the marginalization of identity in the post-independence period. Filemon Chirwa may never have reached the lofty political heights of some of his contemporaries, yet in writing *Nthanu za Chitonga* 'the Tonga sage'⁴⁷ produced a literary artefact of immense value for the generations that followed him.

There are many stories that could be told about Filemon's work: for example, how it made a 'new relationship to oral culture' (Barber 2006: 18) possible, or the interplay between orality and literacy (Hofmeyr 1996). This article has chosen, however, to

⁴⁷ Interview with David Mphande, Mzuzu, 2017.

focus on the politics of literature presented in this work, in order to elucidate how writing down 'folktales' can be a deeply political act that has political, and social, ramifications across a century. Filemon's work offers a particularly cogent example of small-scale local African literary productions being enfolded into a broader politics of literature, a politics that in Filemon's case was in direct conversation with the colonial state. As Hofmeyr *et al.* argued in their discussion on 'The book in Africa', 'books are force fields that can rearrange space and people' (2001: 2). With Filemon's work, we can see the unfolding of this capacity, as the book is intended to rearrange the political structures of a community, and later becomes a force field around which communities mobilize and build a social and political picture of themselves through its symbolism.

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