

MOUNT MALAVI

MOUNTAIN OF MALICE, MOUNTAIN OF MYSTERY¹

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It is the most striking of the Chisombezi Valley land-marks your eye settles on when first entering this part of the country from just about any direction one might choose. It is the largest mountain between Blantyre, Malawi's largest city and the Mulanje Mountain range that runs along the eastern border separating Malawi and Mozambique. Indeed, where ever you are in this region, it is certain to make its presence felt.

Malavi means "*deadly surprise*". For anyone who does not care for surprises more generally, this particular kind is certain to be most unwelcome. Indeed, the idea of dying suddenly, without warning, revelation, or preparation, simply stunned and astonished at the impossible turn of events that just managed to have your life completely and terminally undone . . . is surely that; a very deadly surprise.

No one knows what Mount Malavi was called before that great mass of earth and rock was named that by the Lomwe tribe a hundred or more years ago. But it is a name that is in striking contrast to the Lomwe people who, now lost to the melding of ethnicity caused by the co-mingling of the six dominant tribes of Malawi, nevertheless had their influence on making this place part of the "*warm heart of Africa*" that it is today.

The Lomwe tribe stemmed from the great Bantu migration of more than three millennia ago, one of the largest mass movements of people and culture in recorded history. At that time and for reasons unknown, Bantu speaking people left the vicinity of Cameroon in west Africa and, in the case of local settlers, came by way of Mozambique to settle finally in and around the Chisombezi River area of the southern region of Malawi. Thought of more broadly, this triangular region is delineated by the Mulanje Mountains to the south and east, the Shire Highlands to the North, and where the large commercial city of Blantyre sprawls today. Blantyre is located near the Shire River that helps divide the Great Rift Valley basin to the south and west of the other two cornerstones. The entire region occupies not more than 2,000 square kilometers (or ~700 sq. miles).

Today, Mount Malavi continues as a symbol of the dark side - the spiritual world apart from God, populated by specters said to pervade somehow still both that other world as well as this one more familiar to all of us. Malavi, full of shadows and shrouded in mystery, remains the home of the many dead who languish there. The people know this by the howling heard at night; cries that sometime resemble the whining yelp of the hyena wandering throughout the night in this the Dark Continent, but which all know as well as their tongues know the edge of their own teeth, are not and cannot be the same.

One could of course blame the wind or other wild animals. Yet, others insist with the air of certain knowledge, that the tormented cries arise from the anguish and time-frozen terror of those many dead who were killed here at the base of the mountain so long ago. Those dead

¹ Special thanks to Patrick Malikebu who provided much of the aural history employed in this edition of Jan's Journal.

who now remain stranded; caught in the vortex that jaggedly divides our own physical dimension from this lost element of time and reality.

That these poor souls remain there at all, somehow wedged one foot still unrelenting in this world and one somehow being pulled into the hereafter, bewilders enough, but to congregate so perversely at one place; the site where so many lives were taken so suddenly so long ago, summarily stills the breast while the heart thunders on.

If you will listen, you may be able to hear them for the sun is now down and the waning gibbous moon not yet up. Yes, the howls can be heard.

Not surprisingly, traditional African ('Witch') Doctors make their livelihood from attempting to alleviate the distress of those populating *both* worlds, and still populate this region of Africa as well as the rest of the continent. Stanch shamans and mediums are said to heal the sick (shamanism), communicate with and settle old disputes with lost relatives (necromancy), clarify the nature of problems you or your village have been experiencing with God or nature (shamanism through divination), and to change your life by casting spells (through witchcraft and sorcery).

Wherever there is a failure to understand, to know, or to explain the many otherwise completely "natural" occurrences of our lives; rainfall or drought, bumper crop harvests or famine, and health or death, these supernatural acrobats and performers jump to take the center ring in this circus-like festival of fear and faith. No where can this be clearer than when these witch doctors are near Mount Malawi and the many who still cry out from their dark and unending graves.

That traditional African Doctors may do little actual healing, may not produce one more ear of maize, or add a single drop of moisture to the rainfall. Yet, when times become desperate, when events appear inexplicable, and when answers to life's questions withheld, every stone is unturned for the explanation or solution sought. This is most readily the case when fear is involved, especially fear of the unknown and the night, and yes the sounds heard once again just a moment ago. Can you hear them cry out?

It may have been this sense of great impending doom and foreboding that drove the Lomwe tribe to consider the desperate plan that they concocted sometime not long after 1835. For known to them from sentinel scouting parties, was the coming into their tranquil territory of the feared Ngoni warriors.

The Ngoni (previously known as Ndwandwe) had been forced from South Africa and Swaziland in the south towards the area between the Zambezi River (just south of Malawi) and Lake Victoria (north of Malawi at the juncture of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania) following defeats at the hands of Shaka, the famous Zulu warrior.

Borrowing Shaka's very own peculiar sense of manifest destiny and battleground strategies, a number of lesser warring tribes, like phoenix rising from their own ashes, were commissioned by their defeat at the hands of the Zulu to march on to new campaigns against new tribal forces. Thus, down but not ever out, the Ngoni copied and simulated the Zulu's own methods, adopting their peculiar style of warfare using short stabbing spears and smaller, but highly organized fighting units. Thus, when they came upon the steadily retiring

Lomwe, the fearsome Ngoni heavily outmanned and ‘outgunned’ them in every respect . . . save one.

The Ngoni had ‘as many as a thousand warriors’ who were battle hardened. They poison-tipped their Shaka-like spears and continuously evolved the battle tactics that had already left countless warriors dead. With their ultimate fate at the hands of the approaching Ngoni a foregone conclusion, the Lomwe knew that if they did not manage something extraordinary and in a hurry, they were most certainly to die, for the Ngoni, once more copying the Zulus, took no prisoners.

The Ngoni leader at the time was Zwangendaba, named after the birds of prey that consumed the dead of their defeated opponents. Much like a *blitzkrieg* before its time, with winged-like speed and surprise, it was thus said that Zwangendaba would “*devour*” his enemies.

So it was around 1837 (about thirty-five years before the famous “David Livingstone, I presume” meeting between Scottish explorer David Livingstone and Anglo-American explorer-journalist Henry Stanley northwest of here), that the Ngoni approached the Lomwe and Mount Malavi from the Shire River in the west. Being that there was little question as to what was going to happen to the Lomwe, and being that the Lomwe had little taste for battle or warfare, the Lomwe instead fostered a new taste; a taste for something quite different and decided to say, “*beans*” to the whole affair.

In fact, what they said was, “*kalongonda beans*”.

Now, *kalongonda* beans will not actually kill you – if they are prepared properly. But, undercooked *kalongonda* beans can be quite deadly. And, as the aural history of this region informs us, knowing their more Spartan enemies would eagerly take the spoils of a battle, even one yet hardly fought, the Lomwe feigned battle and retreat drawing their enemies forward as they were in turn falling back; falling back steadily towards the infamous Malavi Mountain. As they approached the mountain and as the day in question began to draw to a close, Lomwe women carefully prepared especially *under*-cooked *kalongonda* beans for their advancing foe to find and, of course, upon which to feast.

The Ngoni took over the Lomwe’s campsites at the base of Mount Malavi just as the setting sun met the horizon and discovered the ill-prepared beans simmering in the large urns and pots. It was a sight that suddenly seemed more than the Ngoni could resist.

The Ngoni, not being indigenous to this region of the continent, did not recognize the malevolently prepared legumes as the very deadly poison that they were, but only as a tasty meal to be consumed following their strenuous battle-march from the camp they had departed from earlier that day. With night fall upon them and a hard climb up Malavi to chase after the retreating Lomwe still ahead for them upon the morrow, the ‘victorious’ Ngoni sat at the base of Mount Malavi to rest on their laurels and of course to consume their day’s prize, the only *partly* cooked, poisonous *kalongonda* beans left behind by their ‘defeated’ enemy.

Large numbers of the enemy fell to their death that very night shocked beyond words at the sudden turn of fate that so cheated their lives from them. And those who survived the night, wished to die in equal numbers to their fallen brethren throughout most of the next day. Too sick to fight and only able to make their weakened and painful retreat, the battle that was never truly fought had thus been won nevertheless . . . by the Lomwe.

And so now you can understand how it is that the howling in these nights have come to be explained. The witch doctors and wise men say again what their fathers taught over and over. That hundreds of poisoned Ngoni remain trapped to this day in their agony, bellies full of poisoned beans, scratching and crawling to their hideous destiny in pained and shocked retreat, clinging to a world to which they no longer belong yet a world from which their own incredulous disbelief refuses to permit them their departure. A world of life deprived from them by the wit and will of a peaceful people intent on their own self-preservation . . . and just a few well placed, and mightily undercooked kalongonda beans.

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June 2004
Nguludi, Malawi

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