RITUALS OF KINSHIP AMONG THE NYAKYUSA

Monica Wilson

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RITUALS OF KINSHIP AMONG THE NYAKYUSA

BY
MONICA WILSON

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TO WHOM DO THEY PRAY?

Abanyafyale, abanyafyale bikwiputa kugu?
Abanyafyale, abanyafyale bikwiputa kugu?
Kubasyuka! Kubasyuka!

Chorus: Alikumwanya! Alikumwanya!

Abasungu, abasungu bikwiputa kugu?
Abasungu, abasungu bikwiputa kugu?
Kundalama! Kundalama!

Chorus: Alikumwanya! Alikumwanya!

Abisilamu, abisilamu, bikwiputa kugu?
Abisilamu, abisilamu, bikwiputa kugu?
Kwa Mohamedi! Kwa Mohamedi!

Chorus: Alikumwanya! Alikumwanya!

Abosigwa, abosigwa, bikwiputa kugu?
Abosigwa, abosigwa, bikwiputa kugu?
Kwa Jesu! Kwa Jesu!

Chorus: Alikumwanya! Alikumwanya!

Translation

The chiefs, the chiefs to whom do they pray?
The chiefs, the chiefs to whom do they pray?
To the shades! To the shades!

Chorus: He is above! He is above!

The Europeans, the Europeans to whom do they pray?
The Europeans, the Europeans to whom do they pray?
To money! To money!

Chorus: He is above! He is above!

The Mohammedans, the Mohammedans to whom do they pray?
The Mohammedans, the Mohammedans to whom to they pray?
To Mohammed! To Mohammed!

Chorus: He is above! He is above!

The baptised, the baptised to whom do they pray?
The baptised, the baptised to whom do they pray?
To Jesus! To Jesus!

Chorus: He is above! He is above!

(Song of Nyakyusa Christians)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the broken country to the north of Lake Nyasa live the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people who, together with those closely related to them in language and culture, number[1] nearly a quarter of a million. They stretch across the river which divides Tanganyika Territory from Nyasaland and, because they were hemmed in by mountains and swift rivers, they long remained isolated from the outside world. They are skilful herdsmen and cultivators, well fed, and practising a system of green manuring and rotation which allows of fixed cultivation, in contrast to the shifting systems of most of their neighbours.

Their villages are large. Each is occupied by a group of age mates together with their wives and young children. Father and son and grandson *must* live in separate villages and full brothers are commonly separated also. Fathers and young sons are in adjoining villages, but the villages of grown men are scattered about a chiefdom without reference to the genealogical connections of its members. The only kinship relationships common within a village are those of half-brothers and of affines, for a man often marries the daughter or sister of a village mate. But although they live dispersed, agnatic kinsmen are bound together by a strong lineage organization. Property, in the form of cattle, circulates within agnatic lineages, passing from brother to full brother in order of seniority, and thence to the son of the senior brother, who inherits, with the cattle, obligations towards his juniors and a certain authority over them. Half-brothers may also be linked by regular exchanges of cattle—'milking one another's cows', as the Nyakyusa call it. Cattle are given at a marriage by the groom to the bride's father, and distributed by him among his brothers and sons; the bulk of them usually going to one of the bride's full brothers, who retains through life a special responsibility for her and her children. Polygyny is approved. The form most favoured

[1] Throughout this book the present tense refers to the period 1934–8 when the material presented here was collected.

is the marriage of two sisters, or of a woman and her brother's daughter, to the same man; such 'sisters' are closely identified and their children are treated almost as full siblings.

Besides being bound together by a common interest in property —the cattle of the lineage—kinsmen join in the celebration of rituals to their common ancestors; for the very fact of their kinship is held to make them mystically dependent upon one another, and more particularly on the prayers of the most senior among them. At a funeral kinsmen will gather from many of the villages of the chiefdom, and some from other chiefdoms also. The range of kinship recognized varies somewhat with status, but the effective lineage group is normally of a span of three or four generations only, including descendants of a common grandfather or great-grandfather.

Traditionally villages were grouped in a number of small independent chiefdoms led by hereditary chiefs. Each chiefdom contained many kinsmen, but there was no fiction of common descent of all the men of a chiefdom, or of chiefs and people. There were thus three types of social group: villages occupied by age-mates, who shared common land rights, and herded and fought together; lineages bound by common interest in inherited cattle and common rituals; and chiefdoms in which the bond was occupation of a common territory and allegiance to a common chief.

Relations between the three groups are epitomized in the traditional law relating to theft, adultery, murder, and witchcraft.[1] A man was a member both of a village and of a lineage and both groups were responsible for his behaviour. An adulterer or cattle-thief was speared by the injured party and his kinsmen, if they could catch him. If they could not, they might attack any member of his age-village. This commonly led to war between the villages, but short of this, the kinsmen of the dead man claimed compensation from the thief or adulterer and his kin, not from the avengers. Both lineage and age-village were therefore corporate groups, the members of which were mutually responsible for each other, and it is significant that *both* senior kinsman and village headman of the defendant were required to accompany him when the case came to court. Murder was treated as a private delict, the kinsmen of the dead attacking or claiming compensation from the murderer and his kin, but witchcraft was treated as an offence against the

[1] cf. Monica Wilson, *Good Company* (1952), p. 150.

state, and the property of a convicted witch went to the chief. Therefore the lineage was not the unrivalled principle of social grouping among the Nyakyusa as it was among the Tallensi or Nuer, but it was a corporate body.[1]

The existence of three types of groups among the Nyakyusa made for social integration. The divergent interests of villages were checked by the fact that every man had kinsmen in many other villages upon whom he was dependent, economically and ritually; the fissiparous tendencies of lineages were checked by the loyalties of lineage members to different villages; and the villages and lineages were all held to be dependent upon their chief for the fertility of their land, control of the weather, and success in warfare.

Since an account of the Nyakyusa age-villages and an outline of their kinship system have already been published,[2] we may now turn directly to the topic of this book, their religion.

The traditional religion of the Nyakyusa people has three elements: First, there is a lively belief in the survival of the dead and in the power of senior relatives, both living and dead, over their descendants; secondly, there is a belief in medicines, that is, in a mystical power residing in certain material substances which is used by those who have the requisite knowledge; thirdly, there is a belief in witchcraft, that is, an innate power to harm others exercised by certain individuals, and in the mystical power of fellow villagers to punish wrongdoers. This last power, 'the breath of men', is akin to witchcraft. It may be objected that a belief in witchcraft is in no sense 'religious', but to exclude discussion of it in an account of Nyakyusa religion is comparable to excluding a reference to the devil in a discussion of Christianity. Evil is a reality which must be interpreted in one fashion or another in every cosmology.

The belief in the survival of the dead and the power of senior relatives, is expressed in a series of elaborate rituals, one set of which concern only kinsmen and are directed towards the im-

[1] There appear to be many gradations between a society with no corporate lineages, such as the Lozi, and one like the Tallensi in which the lineage is the basis of all important social groups, just as there are gradations between a stateless society in which all offences are treated as quarrels between groups of kinsmen, and a primitive state in which any serious assault is an offence against the state.

[2] Monica Wilson, op. cit. and 'Nyakyusa kinship' in *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. Radcliffe-Brown and Daryll Forde (1951).

mediate ancestors of the participants, and another set which concern chiefdoms and groups of chiefdoms, and are directed towards the immediate ancestors of ruling chiefs and certain distant ancestors of the chiefs' line, heroes in Nyakyusa history. The name of one of these heroes, Kyala, has been used by the missionaries to translate the word 'God', but all the evidence available goes to show that Kyala was, traditionally, but one of several distant ancestors to whom regular sacrifices were made on behalf of a large group of chiefdoms. All the rituals of this type—those directed to family shades, the chiefs' ancestors, and the heroes—are concerned with that which is beneath (*pasi*), not that which is above. Men look to the earth where corpses are buried, not to any sky god.

The theme of the present volume is the rituals celebrated by kinsmen at death, at the puberty and marriage of a girl (the last two events usually coinciding), at birth, especially twin birth, and in misfortune. A further volume will deal with the communal rituals celebrated before the annual break of the rains; whenever public misfortune such as drought, flood, famine, or plague occurs or threatens; before battle; and when a chief is succeeded by his sons, and the younger generation take over power from their elders. There is no circumcision or initiation of men other than the 'coming out' ceremony, when a whole generation takes over responsibility for the administration and defence of the chiefdom from their fathers. Some reference to three of the heroes—Kyala, Lwembe, and Mbasi—is made in texts on the rituals of kinsmen, but our discussion of them is postponed to the second book in which the rituals directed to them are described.

A section of the Nyakyusa people is Christian and its influence on pagan thought and practice is appreciable; however, discussion of this is also postponed to the second book, since it is most evident in the changing concept of Kyala. There, too, the connections between change in ritual and other aspects of the social structure between 1934 and 1955 are analysed.

The Nyakyusa cult of senior relatives (like any ancestor cult) is not intelligible or significant apart from a study of kinship, and it may be argued that this material should be presented only as part of an analysis of Nyakyusa kinship, but we cannot discuss everything at once and some measure of abstraction is necessary. No one ritual among the Nyakyusa is fully intelligible without reference to the whole series of rituals. The principle, propounded forty-five years ago by Professor Radcliffe-Brown, that a symbol

recurring in a cycle of rituals is likely to have the same significance in each, holds good for the Nyakyusa: certain symbols of shaving, washing, eating, spreading banana leaves, scattering grain, and so forth were similarly interpreted by our informants in the different rituals of the cycle, and their full significance is only apparent when a comparison of their various uses is made. In this book, therefore, attention is focused on the ritual cycle. A comparison of numerous rites reveals a *symbolic pattern*, the counterpart, in the emotional aspect, of kinship organization in the practical aspect; and the comments of the more self-conscious Nyakyusa on the rites indicate the *intellectual system* linked with this pattern.

As already mentioned, the religious conceptions of the Nyakyusa include the belief in medicines, in 'the breath of men', and in witchcraft, as well as in the power of senior relatives. The importance of medicines in the rituals directed to the shades will be evident in every chapter of this book. References to witchcraft and the 'breath of men' are not so frequent, since these form what is on the whole a separate system of beliefs, and refer to a different set of relationships. The ancestor cult is concerned *solely* with the relationships of kinsmen, and of the chiefs and their peoples; witchcraft and 'the breath of men' *mainly* with the relationships of fellow villagers—i.e. age mates and their wives—though it also impinges on kinship and political relationships. Only in the relationship of spouses, and that between chief and village headmen, do the two sets of beliefs constantly overlap. An account of the Nyakyusa conception of witchcraft and 'the breath of men' has already been published, and it has been shown that accusations of witchcraft occur most frequently between fellow villagers and, nowadays, between fellow employees, that is, between non-relatives; they are also fairly frequently directed against wives and co-wives; but accusations of witchcraft against kinsmen of the same lineage are very rare.[1] Antagonism between kinsmen occurs and is expressed in accusations of practising sorcery, as well as in fear of the power of senior relatives, but most misfortunes are attributed to the lust and envy of neighbours or wives rather than to the malice of kinsmen. Evil is conceived of as having a personal cause, but as originating generally outside the circle of kin. The mystical power of senior relatives (living and dead) can never be used irresponsibly—it cannot operate unless the cause is just—and therefore misfortune emanating from the shades is always a just

[1] Monica Wilson, *Good Company*, pp. 102–4; 198–205.

retribution, not an irresponsible assault, like that made by witches.

The religion of the Nyakyusa is expressed in ritual rather than in dogma. Everyone participates, at some time or another, in a variety of rituals; a great deal of time and energy is devoted to them, and they are elaborate. By comparison, the dogma and myth are limited both in content and in influence. Many more people participate in rituals than are fully conscious of dogma and myth; many more people can describe rituals than interpret them. In this analysis, therefore, the rituals are first described and the principal dogmas are deduced from the Nyakyusa interpretation of them.

The stress is on the Nyakyusa interpretation of their own rituals, for anthropological literature is bespattered with symbolic guessing, the ethnographer's interpretation of the rituals of other people. Now it seems probable that certain symbols are universal in the sense that they express the same ideas in all societies. Many other symbols are emotionally intelligible when interpreted—the following pages are full of examples—but it is foolish to imagine that an individual schooled in one culture can understand the symbolism of another without instruction. For this reason, and at the risk of wearying the reader, many of the texts on which this interpretation is based are quoted. The interpretations of even the most self-conscious Nyakyusa, such as Kasitile the rain-maker, Mwandisi the old blind historian, Mwasalemba, Lyandileko and Kakune the doctors, do not, of course, reveal the whole truth about Nyakyusa rituals, but *any analysis not based on some translation of the symbols used* by people of that culture is open to suspicion. The texts were recorded in the Nyakyusa language by Godfrey or Monica Wilson, or one of our two Nyakyusa clerks, Mwaikambo and Mwaisumo, and the informants most often quoted were selected for their special knowledge. And very many others discussed rituals with us.[1]

Not all Nyakyusa are conscious of all the interpretations given. A few symbols, such as the association of different types of banana with male and female respectively, are known to everyone; but the meaning of many of the events in the rituals was obscure to young men and women. Most of the interpretations quoted have, however, been given by more than one informant (as is shown in the text and documents) and may be taken as *common*, i.e. current in

[1] For the methods of field-work cf. Monica Wilson, *Good Company*, pp. vii–ix.

the group. In the few cases in which our informant may have been giving his own individual interpretation, 'putting a bucket down into his subconscious and pulling it up', it was at least a Nyakyusa subconscious, and the interpretation is in terms of the culture. It is with common, not individual, symbols that we are concerned: what is offered in this book is a sociological, not a psychological, analysis.

Similarities between the symbolism of Nyakyusa rituals and the symbolism of dreams and neuroses in Western society will be obvious to readers. That preoccupation with anal and oral functions, with 'nakedness' (though the Nyakyusa habitually wore the most exiguous of coverings), with death, coition, and birth, with mastery ('overstepping') and incest, which is characteristic of the rituals we describe, is evident also in any textbook of psychoanalysis dealing with Western Europeans and Americans; and certain symbols such as a house, a doorway, a spear, seed, and so forth are common to both cultures; but here we are not concerned to trace these similarities. Our business is to lay bare the symbolic pattern of the Nyakyusa without reference to the Western tradition.

The material used for the sociological analysis of ritual consists of two types: observation or description of events, and statements about associations. The greatest difficulty in presenting it has been to choose between a chronological account of each ritual, followed by the Nyakyusa translation or interpretation of the symbolism, and then by the sociological analysis; and an integrated account combining the interpretation and analysis with the description. The advantage of the first method is that the validity of both interpretation and analysis can be more easily judged since the evidence on which it is based is fully set out; the disadvantage is that the description itself implies interpretation and analysis. The symbolism is often implicit in the description of events, and the separation of description from interpretation involves repetition; at the same time the classification of events and symbols is itself a form of analysis, and the separation of description from analysis tends to conceal this. The present study is a compromise between the two approaches. Where events and their symbolism are fairly straightforward, the interpretation accompanies the description; but where, as in the rituals of farewell to the dead, puberty and marriage, and abnormal birth, they are complicated, and the interpretation may well be questioned, accounts of the events are separated from detailed evidence on symbolism. Analysis is neces-

sarily implied all through, but since the argument can only be unfolded step by step (for no one ritual can be fully analysed until all are described) a discussion of it is reserved to the concluding chapters. In interpreting the symbolism, cross reference between the different rituals of the cycles would be too frequent to give in the text. Readers wishing to follow up references to the symbolism of bananas, for example, or *ikipiki* medicine, should use the index.

The link between religious beliefs and morality (in the sense of right behaviour) is very clear among the Nyakyusa. Many misfortunes are attributed to sin, that is, wrong-doings (*inongwa*) thought to be supernaturally punished. Indeed, to the Nyakyusa the idea of the wicked man 'spreading himself like a green bay tree'[1] is inconceivable, and the disciples' question: 'Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'[2] cold common sense. Here we are concerned with the form of morality[3] sanctioned by Nyakyusa religion, with the conception of good and evil, and with the relation between belief and behaviour.[4] A table of private misfortunes attributed to the anger of senior relatives is included in this volume; public misfortunes will be discussed in the succeeding one; and a table of misfortunes attributed to witchcraft, sorcery, and the legitimate anger of neighbours ('the breath of men') has been given in the study of Nyakyusa age-villages already published.[5] While the Nyakyusa lay great emphasis on the correct performance, in every detail, of certain rituals, their very performance implies co-operation between kinsmen, and not only co-operation but amity. For 'anger in the heart', if unconfessed, may bring misfortune. Thus though the outward form is stressed, the inward and spiritual is not totally ignored.

We proceed on the assumption that men express in ritual what moves them most; that the form of expression is conventional and obligatory, and that therefore in ritual the values of a group (as opposed to those of individuals) are revealed.

[1] Psalm xxxvii: 35. [2] John ix, 2.

[3] I cannot accept Professor Radcliffe-Brown's definition of morality as the control of conduct by 'public opinion and conscience' as opposed to control by religion. Nor do I accept Professor Macbeath's argument that primitive man has an idea of good quite apart from religion. A. E. Taylor's view of morality comes much closer to the facts as shown in Nyakyusa society.

cf. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, p. 172; A. Macbeath, *Experiments in Living*, Gifford Lectures 1948–9; A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist*, Gifford Lectures 1926–8.

[4] The germ of the book is Godfrey Wilson's 'An African morality', *Africa*, 1936.

[5] Monica Wilson, *Good Company*, pp. 198–213.

By *ritual* we mean a primarily religious action, that is, action directed to securing the blessing of some mystical power or powers. The action may be a negative, i.e. an avoidance or taboo, as well as a positive one. Symbols and concepts are employed in rituals but are subordinated to practical ends. Ritual is distinguished from *ceremonial*, which is an elaborate conventional form for the expression of feeling, not confined to religious occasions; any emotional situation, whether religious or secular, may be clothed in ceremony, and a ceremony is not enforced by mystical sanctions, only by conventional ones. In short, a ceremony is an appropriate and elaborate form for the expression of feeling; but a ritual is action believed to be efficacious.[1] Confusion between the two arises in our own society, for what is ritual to some (e.g. a rite of baptism or marriage) is but ceremonial to others. In Nyakyusa society the distinction is fairly clear-cut: *ubunyago*, which is translated here as *a ritual*, means a series of actions directed towards the shades or heroes, and enforced by mystical sanctions, as opposed to action which is merely customary and conventional (*ulwiho*). At a burial, some actions are only *ulwiho*, others are also *ubunyago*. A negative ritual, that which is taboo, is *mwiko*.

Ubunyago is applied as a noun, and in its verbal form, *ukunyagula* (to perform a ritual), to funeral rites, especially that part of such rites in which only immediate relatives participate (*ubunyago bwa bufyele*); to the girls' puberty and marriage ritual (*ubunyago bwa busungu*), to the ritual at birth (*ubunyago bwa bufwe*), especially at twin birth (*ubunyago bwa mapasa*); to the rituals performed on behalf of the country for rain and fertility (*ubunyago bwa kisu*); to the treatment of the young chief and village headmen when authority is handed to them by the older generation (*ubunyago bwa busoka*); and, nowadays, to the sacraments of the Christian Church. *Unyago* is the specialist who knows the right medicines and observances and conducts the ritual. The word is translated as 'officiant' or 'priest'.

By a *symbol* is meant something which typifies or represents something else. Our Nyakyusa informants spoke of *ififwani*—likenesses (the word is also used for photographs)—and in expounding rituals they repeatedly said of an object or action: 'This means (*kokuti*) such and such.' Symbolism is always based on an association, a feeling of likeness between things. The intrinsic quality of an object, or relationship, or event, is expressed in terms of another

[1] cf. Godfrey Wilson, 'Nyakyusa conventions of Burial', *Bantu Studies*, 1939.

object or action which it is felt to resemble. The images men use, the things they feel to be alike, are determined in a general way by the form of the society, and Nyakyusa images are in terms of bananas, staple grains, cattle, smithing on a primitive forge, lineage organization and so on. There are cultural idioms, accepted forms of expression, which frequently recur, but the particular associations are not predictable any more than the associations made by a poet in our own society—the priest and the doctor are indeed in one aspect poets.

The essence of Nyakyusa ritual is that things which are felt to be alike are taken as causally connected. Both positive actions and avoidances or taboos are based on the assumption that like objects or actions react on one another. This was clearly recognized by an informant who remarked: 'avoidances come from resemblances.' The basis is invariably the *feeling* of likeness, but mixed up with this there is often exact observation, as in the following taboo. The husband of a pregnant woman may not hunt big game because, it is said, they will be unusually fierce and attack him particularly. The association made is between a pregnant woman who is irritable, 'fierce' (*nkali*), and the game which is fierce. The husband is identified with his wife, 'and', the Nyakyusa say, 'lion *always* attack a cow in calf'. Sometimes like things are felt to be antagonistic, as 'seed in the belly' and seed in the ground, and sometimes sympathetic. Sometimes like is thought to produce like—a pregnant woman is forbidden to sit close to someone lest she bears twins—and sometimes men mime a misfortune as a prophylactic against it.

The rituals are magical in the sense that efficacy is held to lie in the particular material form,[1] but they vary in detail with the cultural group, just as the language does.[2] The rituals of the Lakeshore plain in Tanganyika (MuNgonde) and of Selya are almost identical, but those of the Kukwe, the Lugulu, the Saku, the Ndali, the Penja, and the people of Ngonde in Nyasaland are all somewhat different. Differences in ritual are directly connected by the people themselves with differences in lineage, and the principle is maintained that every individual follows the ritual of his or her father's lineage, though a married woman will follow that of her

[1] For a discussion of this characteristic of magic cf. G. & M. Wilson, *The Analysis of Social Change* (1945), pp. 72–3; 88–95.

[2] An account of the various cultural groups included under Nyakyusa, and of related peoples, is given in *Good Company*. pp. 1–5.

husband when at her husband's home. Kakune, a doctor, explained: 'The ritual for a woman is that of her husband's group, always. My mother was Lugulu, but at her death we did the Kukwe ritual. If my daughter marries a Sangu and dies, they will do the Sangu ritual; she has moved.' We attended a death ritual which was actually performed in two slightly different ways by two sets of mourners. A member of a Sangu family, long established in Selya, had died; sons and daughters of the family performed what was said to be the Sangu ritual, but the children of daughters married to Selya men performed the Selya ritual. Whether the Sangu ritual is really so similar to the Selya ritual as this celebration suggests is doubtful—it seems unlikely, since the Sangu are very different from the Nyakyusa in other respects and their languages are not mutually intelligible—but some sort of adjustment had been made by this foreign family living in Selya and by others in a like position. Our informants *expected* to find parallels to the events of their own rituals in the rituals of neighbouring groups, and they expected also to find *minor* differences. Any variations are explained by the phrase 'that is the custom in their lineage', and the officiant is the final arbitrator as to what is correct. A number of informants also pointed out that the staple foods were used in the death ritual and that these varied somewhat with the area. 'We eat the principal food of the country—it differs with different people. The Kisi and Ngonde (of Nyasaland) use fish, the Ndali use goats, we Nyakyusa cannot use rice but the Swahili would. Our food is bananas.[1] The pumpkin, which we also use, is a very old vegetable and is still much eaten; it is one of the best vegetables.' The Sangu use millet porridge, the Penja maize and beans.

In this book are described the rituals of the main cultural groups of the Nyakyusa—those of the people of Selya and Masoko and the Lake-shore plain (MuNgonde)[2] which are similar, and those of the Kukwe which are different, and a few references are made to other variations. The variations are suggestive, for though the details differ, the values and attitudes expressed are identical. There are also minor differences between families of the same cultural group, and in the practice of different officiants, but their

[1] The Nyakyusa use *amatoki* as a general word for plantains and bananas, though *itoki* is properly one variety of plantain. 'Bananas' is used here to include all varieties of bananas and plantains.

[2] cf. Monica Wilson, *Good Company*, p. 2.

interpretations scarcely differ. Thus the commonly accepted idea that ritual forms are more stable than the interpretation of symbolism[1] does not hold for the Nyakyusa.

The account of the ritual cycle begins with an analysis of funeral rites, for of all the family rituals they involve the greatest emotional tension and are the most elaborate, as well as being performed far more frequently than any others. Moreover, in them are adumbrated symbolic patterns which recur again and again throughout the cycle; in them is apparent that preoccupation with fertility characteristic of the cycle—they are a rite of creation as well as a farewell to the dead—and in them lies the key to an understanding of the conception of the *abasyuka*, 'those who have risen from the dead', that is, the shades.

The principal participants in the rituals are immediate kin—parents and children, siblings, grandparents and grandchildren—but the circle included varies with the particular ritual concerned and more distant relatives and neighbours are involved in varying degrees. In order to bring out these differences and avoid repetition, the detailed discussion of who takes part is deferred until after all the rituals have been described.

Should any Nyakyusa, reading this, feel that matters have been revealed which should remain secret, I would remind them that the interpretation of traditional ritual reveals a profound similarity in the phantasies of the Nyakyusa and those of other races; and such understanding of the dark places of men's minds as the *abanyago* possess may swell that body of knowledge which is the heritage of men of all races and cultures.

[1] A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952), pp. 155–7; A. N. Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effects* (1928), p. 75.

CHAPTER II

BURIAL RITES[1]

(a) The form of burial

WHENEVER a death takes place, whether of man, woman, or child, a series of funeral rites lasting a month or more begins. The first of the series is the burial (*ifwa*) which, in the case of most adults, lasts three or four days, though for a rich man it may continue for a week, and for a child it is over in a day. For the sake of convenience the account of burial is given mainly in reference to the burials of men; those of women are very similar and occasional references are made to them; but the constant qualifications of statement that would be necessary to give a complete description of both would be wearisome and are unnecessary for our purpose.

As soon as death occurs the women who are present begin wailing and messages are sent to the chief, the village headman, and the dead man's kinsmen and affines, to announce the fact and bid them to the burial. The first message is sent to the father, or to a senior brother, if one is still alive, or failing them to the heir of the dead man, and he it is who sends out the other messages. If the father or a senior brother is alive the burial may take place at his homestead, the body being carried there at once; otherwise the dead man is buried at his own home: the choice rests with his father. A married woman is buried at her husband's home if she has borne children, otherwise at her father's; an elderly widow is buried by her son.

Messages must be sent to all the fathers-in-law and all the sons-in-law both of the dead man and of the senior kinsman who buries him, to all the dead man's full and half-brothers, to the husbands of his sisters, to any classificatory brothers with whom he exchanged cows, to his mother's father or brother, to the full and half-brothers of his father, and to his sons. If any one of these

[1] This description is an amended version of that published by Godfrey Wilson in 'Nyakyusa Conventions of Burial', *Bantu Studies*, 1939. The theoretical analysis differs somewhat from that offered in the paper, for the ritual element appears to me to be dominant at the burial as well as in the later 'farewell to the dead'. Between us we attended thirty funerals, in whole or in part.

is forgotten he will be angry: 'It happens sometimes that a kinsman comes in later, after the man is buried, and is very angry because no message was sent to him; he comes in a passion, and perhaps he beats his brother [the one who should have sent him a message]. Then the others catch hold of him and say: "Why do you not come soberly and greet us decently with the appropriate words? Come now, why?" And if he does not stop they beat him.'

These kinsmen and affines, with their wives and children, are under obligation to come to the burial, unless they are sick. Young children under the age of 10 or 11 are not obliged to come, though they often do, but older children must do so. One reason for the continuance of the burial ceremonies for three or four days is that this gives time for relatives from a distance to receive the messages and come. Deliberately to refuse to send a message or, on the other side, to refuse to come to a burial for no good reason, is a symbolic breaking of the bond of kinship and no one ever does either, unless there is a serious quarrel and all economic and social relations are being broken off between the two families concerned.

The village neighbours also are obliged to come to every burial in the village. They normally wish to do so, but, even if they do not, they still come for shame or for fear of being accused of witchcraft if they stay away. Where there is friendship the neighbours come in grief and sympathy and quarrels are softened by the fact of death, but, if the memory of enmity still persists, then the last sanctions are shame and fear: 'Some people mourn more than others.' 'The men who knew him say: "Let us go and mourn him." ' 'Those who did not know him intimately mourn because each thinks: "He has died, my neighbour, and so will it be with me one day." ' 'If I have quarrelled with my neighbour and he dies, I go to his burial for I say to myself: "It is true that while he lived we quarrelled, but now he is dead and we shall never meet again. I too will go to his burial and mourn him." ' 'If a village neighbour does not come to a burial we say he is unkindly and unsociable.' 'And if a man does not go to his neighbour's burial then at once people say: "It was you who bewitched him. Why else do you not come to bury him?" ' Several of the accusations of witchcraft recorded had been occasioned by a man's absence from a village neighbour's funeral. For it is believed that witches are chary of going to the burials of their victims lest the dead should rise and denounce them.

A chief normally goes to all burials in his own country, except

those of very young children. 'He goes because it is his subject who has died: he is like the senior kinsman of the whole country, he rules all.' 'If a chief omits to go to a burial people say nothing, they know that he is always going to burials and they think that perhaps he has some urgent business. But if he constantly misses burials then people say that he has no affection for his people, that he does not come to bury them as is fit; and if a chief hears them saying this then he is ashamed.' Sometimes a chief who is busy will send a son to represent him. And he sends the drums to beat the lament. 'The drum *is* the chief . . . they cannot beat the drum before the chief has spoken.'

Besides the chief, the villagers, the relatives, and the drummers, there come also personal friends of the dead man from other villages and chiefdoms. And beyond all these there often come others who are attracted not so much by grief and sympathy, nor even by the obligation to express these feelings, but rather by the dancing, the crowds and the possibility of getting some meat to eat. Not all those who come stay the whole three or four days, while the relatives who live at a distance often do not arrive until the second or third day.

The Nyakyusa believe that in order to protect the living and avenge the dead it is most important to discover the cause of death. To do this they summon a doctor to perform an autopsy,[1] an operation fearful and repugnant, but felt to be necessary. The symptoms are interpreted in terms of witchcraft or sorcery, or other supposed causes of disease.

On the first, or early on the second, day after death, the burial takes place. The grave is dug in the swept and beaten earth that immediately surrounds the huts. The first spit of earth is always turned by the eldest son of the one who has died. At one burial we saw the young eldest son of a dead man being helped to do this. He was too small to manage a hoe by himself so he caught the handle near the blade while an older relative held it behind to steady it for him. The digging after the first spit is done by a skilled grave-digger, who may be a kinsman or not, with the help of others. The grave is ten or more feet deep with a cave at the bottom to one side. Some graves are oblong, some round or oval,

[1] This is certainly traditional, cf. D. Kerr-Cross, 'Crater Lakes North of Lake Nyasa', *The Geographical Journal*, V (1895), p. 119. The custom is also reported for the Nyamwanga. For a description of the autopsy, cf. Monica Wilson, *Good Company*, pp. 247–50.