

GOOD COMPANY

A Study of Nyakyusa Age-Villages

Monica Wilson

AFRICAN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF
THE 20TH CENTURY



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A STUDY OF NYAKYUSA
AGE-VILLAGES

by

MONICA WILSON

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PREFACE

THE material presented in this book was collected by my late husband, Godfrey Wilson, and myself, between 1934 and 1938; he then being a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation, and I a Research Fellow of the International African Institute. Godfrey Wilson was in the field from September 1934 to December 1935 (with one month's break) and again from September 1936 to January 1938; the interval having been spent in London, digesting material. I did not begin work until March 1935, and was invalidated out of the Territory with malaria for six months in 1937, so that I only spent a total of twenty months in the field. We had three main centres of work: Mwaya on the Lake-shore plain, Isumba in Selya, and Ilolo on the plateau near the Moravian mission of Rungwe; and either together or singly we stayed for some time in Kinga country on the Livingstone mountains, in Ngonde, at Lubaga, near LiKyala, at the White Fathers' station of Makete, on the Lupa gold-fields, in the Government station of Tukuyu, and at the Church of Scotland mission station, Livingstonia (Kondowe), to which youths from Ngonde and a few from Nyakyusa go to be educated (cf. Maps II and III). At one time or another we walked through almost all the district except for the Ndali hills: that expedition, long planned, was repeatedly prevented by attacks of malaria. At Mwaya and Isumba we were lent disused mission houses close to villages; in Ilolo we lived in a Nyakyusa-style house built for us in the main thoroughfare of the village; when camping we pitched our tent within the village usually near the homestead of the chief or headman.

As will be seen, the Nyakyusa are an extremely democratic people, and we lived in democratic fashion with Nyakyusa dropping in to visit, and sharing with us tea, or occasionally more solid meals, at all times of the day. We in turn were welcomed and fed in our friends' houses. After the first few months the atmosphere was extremely cordial, and the Nyakyusa took immense pains to explain their customs and to invite us to events which they thought would interest us. We both learnt to speak Nyakyusa and took notes largely in the language.

We got a great deal of help from two Nyakyusa clerks, Leonard Mwaisumo (now dead) and John Brown Mwaikambo. Mwaisumo laboured to teach us the language (for there is no published grammar or dictionary in Nyakyusa) as well as the conventions of the country, and he wrote many valuable texts. Mwaikambo (who joined us after Mwaisumo had been appointed clerk to the Appeal Court of the district) was also invaluable in writing texts, which gave both his own account of events and those of people he interviewed. Mwaisumo was a commoner; Mwaikambo the son of a chief. Both men were Christians; both had passed Standard VII, and spoke reasonably good English. To mention others by name is perhaps invidious, but we cannot omit these: the great rain-maker, Kasitile, an old man and a conservative, who formally introduced Godfrey Wilson to his ancestors, and opened his heart on matters of ritual; Mwakionde, famous as a doctor and maker of lions, a regular Silenus in his joviality and consumption of beer; Mwandesi, an ancient chief recognized by the Nyakyusa themselves as their foremost authority on history, and Mwaipopo, the chief in whose country we lived in Selya (see Plate V); Mwambuputa, Kakuju, Nsusa, and Mwafula, village headmen and conservatives; Fibombe, a Christian elder (see Plate VI); Porokoto, the pagan (but sceptical) chief of Ilolo, and his sister Martha, a leading woman in Rungwe congregation. Our house-boy Angombwike, and his wife Ndimbomi (see Plate IX) were also admirable informants. Both were Christian, but Angombwike came from a family of pagan doctors, his mother Mwangoka being one of the foremost practitioners in Selya, and herself an excellent informant. These are but a few among many able informants, for we were instructed in *iki-Nyakyusa*, that is, Nyakyusa language and culture, by people of varying status from all over the district.

To the Europeans of Rungwe district and Ngonde we also owe a great debt for warm hospitality, professional help, and a friendly tolerance of the eccentricities of anthropologists. We spent delightful week-ends in Tukuyu, Karonga, and Mwakelili, the guests of one and another of our European friends, who are too many to mention all by name. We must however acknowledge our particular obligation to Mr. P. M. Huggins, District Officer of Rungwe when we arrived, and Mrs. Huggins; Mr. Fox-Strangeways, sometime District Commissioner at Karonga, and Mrs.

Fox-Strangeways; the late Mr. Eustace of the Tanganyika Agricultural Department, and Mrs. Eustace; the Rev. and Mrs. Marx of the Moravian mission at Rungwe; the Rev. and Mrs. Faulds of the Church of Scotland mission at Karonga; the Rev. and Mrs. Galbraith of Livingstonia; Mr. Godfried Schuler, a planter, and his wife; and the Officers of the King's African Rifles then stationed at Masoko.

When planning work among the Nyakyusa, we were guided by Lord Lugard, who had lively recollections of 'the north-enders', and by the Rev. D. R. and Mrs. MacKenzie, missionaries of the Church of Scotland in the area for many years. Mr. MacKenzie had published *The Spirit-Ridden Konde* in 1925, and was deeply interested in the Nyakyusa-Ngonde people; he lent us manuscript notes on the language and gave us the most generous encouragement.

Godfrey Wilson was concerned to make a general sociological study of the Nyakyusa, while I had been commissioned by the International African Institute to study particularly the effects of Christian missions on the community; in practice we found it profitable each to work primarily with our own sex, though we did not do so exclusively. Nyakyusa men proved better informants than women, largely, we think, because the men all had a training in logic, gained in discussion in the villages and in court. Women lacked this training and, except for doctors and those who had had some schooling, they found it difficult to give an account of their customs. The pagan women were markedly less coherent than conservative Pondo women (among whom I had previously worked¹), a difference which I attribute to the narrow scope for leadership among the women in the traditional Nyakyusa society. And the difference between conservative pagan Nyakyusa women (doctors excepted) and Christians who had had some schooling was very noticeable.

Material on pagan and Christian, as well as that on men and women, overlapped at every point; and shortly after leaving the field we agreed that to describe pagan and Christian groups separately would distort the facts very seriously, and that we would collaborate in writing three books on Nyakyusa kinship, Nyakyusa villages, and Nyakyusa chiefdoms, including in each of

¹ Monica Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest: Effects of Contact with Europeans on the Pondo of South Africa* (1936).

them an analysis of pagan and Christian differences. Godfrey Wilson died on active service before the writing of these books was begun, and I am thus solely responsible for the form of this volume, but the material is from the field notes of us both. Portions of Chapter I, and a few paragraphs in other chapters have been quoted (with minor emendations) from articles already published by him. Throughout the book the present tense refers to the period 1934-8 when the material was collected.

The problem of combining adequate documentation with lucidity has not yet been solved in anthropology: either monographs are so loaded with texts and case records as to be almost unreadable, or else they are impressionistic, and the student is left wondering just what evidence there is for the author's conclusions. We have attempted to meet this difficulty by publishing certain relevant documents in a separate section. These documents represent only a small selection of the field notes used, but at least they illustrate the type of evidence on which our argument is based. Many of them are translations of texts written in Nyakyusa by Mwaishumu and Mwaikambo from their own knowledge, or at the dictation of others.

The maps have been drawn by my friend and colleague at Rhodes University College, Professor J. V. L. Rennie, to whom I am much indebted for the time and trouble he has lavished on them. The map of Rungwe District is based on one compiled by Mr. R. de Z. Hall, and traced by Mr. G. D. Arthur, which was given me by the courtesy of the Survey Department of Tanganyika.

Finally, I am indebted to Dr. Audrey Richards, Professor Meyer Fortes, and Professor Dover Wilson for reading this manuscript and making many valuable suggestions.

*Rhodes University College,
Grahamstown, 1949.*

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	<i>page</i> vii
I. INTRODUCTORY	
a. The cultural area	I
b. Environment and economy	5
c. Relations with the outside world	8
d. The form of Nyakyusa society	11
e. The subject of study	18
II. VILLAGE ORGANIZATION	
a. The genesis of the village	19
b. The 'coming out' ceremony	22
c. Relations of villages within one chiefdom	31
d. Moving	35
e. Variation in the basic form of village organization	37
f. Modern modifications	38
III. ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION	
a. Land	44
b. Building	49
c. Cultivation	50
d. Herding	56
e. Hunting and fishing	58
f. Housekeeping	60
g. Economic co-operation beyond the village	60
IV. VALUES	
a. Good company	66
b. Dignity	77
c. Display	78
d. Decency	82
e. Wisdom	89
V. MYSTICAL INTERDEPENDENCE	
a. Witchcraft and 'the breath of men'	91
i. The nature of witchcraft	91
ii. The supposed activities of witches	92
iii. 'The defenders' and 'the breath of men'	96
iv. Witchcraft, 'the breath of men', and morality.	102
v. Procedure in witchcraft cases	109
b. The age-village and the ancestors	121
c. The age-village and Medicines	123
d. The age-village and Christianity	127
e. Witchcraft, medicines and the British Administration	132
VI. THE MAINTENANCE OF ORDER	
a. Arbitration	136
b. Witness to contracts	148
c. Communal responsibility of the age-village	149
d. Social separation	152

VII. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN AGE-VILLAGE ORGANIZATION

a. The peculiarity of Nyakyusa villages	page 158
b. Age-villages and incest	159
c. Good company	162
d. The incidence of accusations of witchcraft	163
e. The form of witch beliefs	164
f. The 'breath of men'	167
g. Kith and kin	170
h. Relative social status	170
i. Constitutional form	173
j. Necessary conditions of age-villages	173

SELECT DOCUMENTS RELATING TO NYAKYUSA AGE-VILLAGES

1. Villages in Mwaipopo's chiefdom	181
2. The 'coming out' (<i>ubusoka</i>)	186
3. A land dispute between villages of the same chiefdom	188
4. A boundary dispute	191
5. Labour histories (summary)	193
6. Change in the relation of fathers and sons	195
7. Homosexuality	196
8. Misfortunes attributed to mystical causes	198
9. Methods of witchcraft	214
10. A myth of witchcraft	217
11. Witchcraft and lust for meat and milk	218
12. Inheritance of witchcraft	219
13. Acquiring witchcraft from friends	221
14. Consciousness of witchcraft	222
15. Associations of <i>ukuloga</i> and <i>ukupita</i>	223
16. Things associated with witchcraft	225
17. Dreams as evidence of witchcraft	226
18. Grounds of accusation of witchcraft	228
19. 'Things which are said to anger the witches and make them throttle us'	229
20. Threats of witchcraft.	231
21. Children learning of witchcraft	234
22. The 'breath of men'	235
23. Ritual of reconciliation	240
24. Procedure in a witchcraft case (traditional)	241
25. The ordeal (<i>umwafi</i>)	244
26. The autopsy	247
27. Wives driven away for witchcraft	251
28. Fear of hereditary witchcraft	252
29. Christian scepticism of witchcraft	254
30. Sorcery	255
31. Deaths attributed to 'the horn'	256
32. Procedure in witchcraft cases (modern)	257
33. Settlement of disputes in Christian villages	262
34. Settlement of disputes between pagans and Christians	264
35. Joint responsibility of neighbours	266
36. Moving	267
37. Fetching home a private individual	270
38. Bringing home a village headman	271

BIBLIOGRAPHY

275

INDEX

278

ILLUSTRATIONS

(Photographs by the author)

I. CULTIVATION IN NYAKYUSA COUNTRY	facing page 18
In the foreground are bananas, coffee, and bamboos; in the middle ridges for sweet potatoes and mounds for maize. On the extreme right Rungwe volcano appears. The house is a modern style, and raised for drainage.	
II. THE GENESIS OF A VILLAGE	19
Boys' huts built on the edge of their fathers' village	
III. MEN'S VILLAGES HIDDEN IN BANANA GROVES AND FRINGED BY CULTIVATED LAND	34
A long hut is visible in the centre of the picture to the right, and an <i>umwali</i> tree on the left. In the cultivated land are oil-bearing <i>unsyunguti</i> trees	
IV. A CHRISTIAN BOYS' VILLAGE BEING BUILT ROUND A SCHOOL (the larger building in the centre of the picture)	35
V. THE CHIEF MWAIPOPO	50
VI. FIBOMBE, A CHRISTIAN ELDER	51
VII. A LITTLE GIRL PLANTING SWEET POTATOES IN HER MOTHER'S FIELD	66
VIII. MEN ON A PIG-HUNT	67
IX. NDIRBOMI, A CHRISTIAN WOMAN, STOOPING TO GREET A MAN	70
X. 'THE DIGNITY OF THE HOMESTEAD'— OLD STYLE	71
Note the tree planted and carefully protected, in the court-yard	
XI. A TRADITIONAL STYLE LONG HUT (<i>IKIBAGA</i>)	78
XII. 'THE DIGNITY OF THE HOMESTEAD'— NEW STYLE	79
Chief Porokoto's main house in Ilo village	
XIII. DISPLAY—THE <i>UKUMOGA</i> DANCE AT A MARRIAGE FEAST	130
A woman in the foreground is wearing the traditional brass body-rings	
XIV. A MEN'S <i>UKUMOGA</i> DANCE AT A FUNERAL	131
XV. SETTLEMENT OF A DISPUTE	146
The anthropologist (Godfrey Wilson) is sitting with the court. On his right is the chief Mwaihojo, on his left Kasitile the rain-maker. Behind him (in a topee) is Mwaisumo the clerk, and Mwakionde, famous as a doctor and maker of lions. In the background is a half-built hut	
XVI. THE FAVOURITE WIFE OF A CHIEF	147

MAPS

II. NGONDE AND NYAKYUSA COUNTRY	<i>facing page</i> 2
III. RUNGWE DISTRICT	16

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

a. The cultural area

THE Nyakyusa and Ngonde¹ are a Bantu-speaking people who live at the north-west corner of Lake Nyasa, on the marshy plain at the head of the Lake, and in the hills that rise steeply to the north and west of it. They straddle the Songwe river which divides Tanganyika from Nyasaland. The area is enclosed by the Lake itself, the escarpment of the Livingstone mountains on the north-east and the Poroto mountains on the north-west. To the west the boundaries are less clearly defined, but coincide pretty closely with the boundary of Rungwe district and with the watershed which separates Nyasaland from Northern Rhodesia. To the south the boundary is that of Chief Mwafulira's country, which lies some twenty miles south of Karonga (see Map I). Most of the area is thus situated between 9° and 10° S., and 33° and 34° E. It covers approximately 4,500 square miles and the population is about 235,000.²

Within this area there are local differences in language and custom. The dominant groups are the *Nyakyusa*, who live in Tanganyika on the Lake-shore plain and up into the hills as far as Rungwe mission, and the people of *Ngonde* who live on the Lake-shore plain in Nyasaland. These two groups speak dialects which, though differing somewhat in vocabulary and pronunciation, are easily understood by speakers from both, and their social structure is essentially similar. The main difference is that in Ngonde a

¹ The old men say *Nkhonde*, and the name appears in most of the literature as *Konde*.

² The area of Tukuyu district is 1,866 square miles, and the area subject to the Kyungu, the paramount chief of Ngonde, is 2,687 square miles. The Tanganyika census of 1931 gives the population of Rungwe district as 195,062: this was believed in the district to be an over-estimate. The population of Ngonde is approximately 40,000. For the southern boundary of the Ngonde people in 1881 see James Stewart, 'Lake Nyassa and the Water Route to the Lake Region of Central Africa', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society, New Series*, Vol. III, 1881. He states that nine miles north of Mount Waller is a marsh; south of it are the Tumbuka, north of it the 'Chungu' (i.e. Ngonde).

centralized chieftainship¹ developed with the development of the ivory trade, whereas among the Nyakyusa (who were geographically much more isolated) nearly a hundred small chiefdoms maintained their independence until the European conquest. In their economy, their kinship system, their age-village organization and their rituals, however, the people of Ngonde are very similar to the Nyakyusa.

The Nyakyusa themselves may be sub-divided into those living on the Lake-shore plain (*MuNgonde*), those around *Masoko*, those to the east under the Livingstone mountains in *Selya* and *Saku*, and those to the north, viz. the *Kukwe* and *Lugulu*. The last two groups differ appreciably in dialect and custom from the others, but all speak dialects which are mutually intelligible.²

There are also a number of small groups with old languages of their own which, though related to that of the Nyakyusa and Ngonde, are more or less unintelligible to them; and they have equally distinct cultures. These include the *Penja* on the plateau to the west of the Kukwe; a small group of *Nyika* on the same plateau; the *Ndali* in the hills to the north of the Songwe; the *Sukwa* to the south of them; the *Lambya* and *Wenya* further west; small groups of *Henga* and *Mambwe* on the western border of Ngonde, and the *Kisi*, a people famous as potters and fishermen, who live on the north-east shore of the Lake. Most of these people are now, we are told, being rapidly assimilated to the Nyakyusa and Ngonde in speech and in law, but we have little

¹ Godfrey Wilson, *The Constitution of Ngonde*, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers No. 3, 1939.

² The term *Nyakyusa* means primarily the people of the Lake plain in Tanganyika, and those around Masoko, but it is now used by extension to include those in Selya and Saku, together with the Kukwe. We use 'Nyakyusa proper', for those on the Lake plain and around Masoko. The terms *Ngonde* and *Mwamba* are a source of some confusion because their meaning varies with the location of the speaker, and the meaning of Ngonde also varies with the prefix used. The primary meaning of *Aba-Ngonde* is 'the people of the plains' but anyone travelling in the direction of the sacred hill Mbande, on which the Kyungu (the paramount chief of Ngonde) lived is spoken of as going *KuNgonde*, whether he start from nearby, or from as far away as Tukuyu (cf. Godfrey Wilson, op. cit., p. 7). *MuNgonde* is generally used by the Nyakyusa for the Lake-shore plain of Tanganyika. In this book we use *Ngonde* for the area of the Kyungu's supremacy, and avoid *MuNgonde*. *AbaMwamba* means by derivation 'the hill people', but is generally used for 'the people to the north'. The Ngonde of Karonga call those on the plain around Mwaya *BaMwamba*, the men of Mwaya apply the name not to themselves, but to the people of Selya, while the people of Selya apply it to those in the hills to the north of them. We therefore avoid the term.

first-hand knowledge of them. On the coast they are classed with Nyakyusa and Ngonde as *Sokile*, a nickname derived from the traditional Nyakyusa greeting.

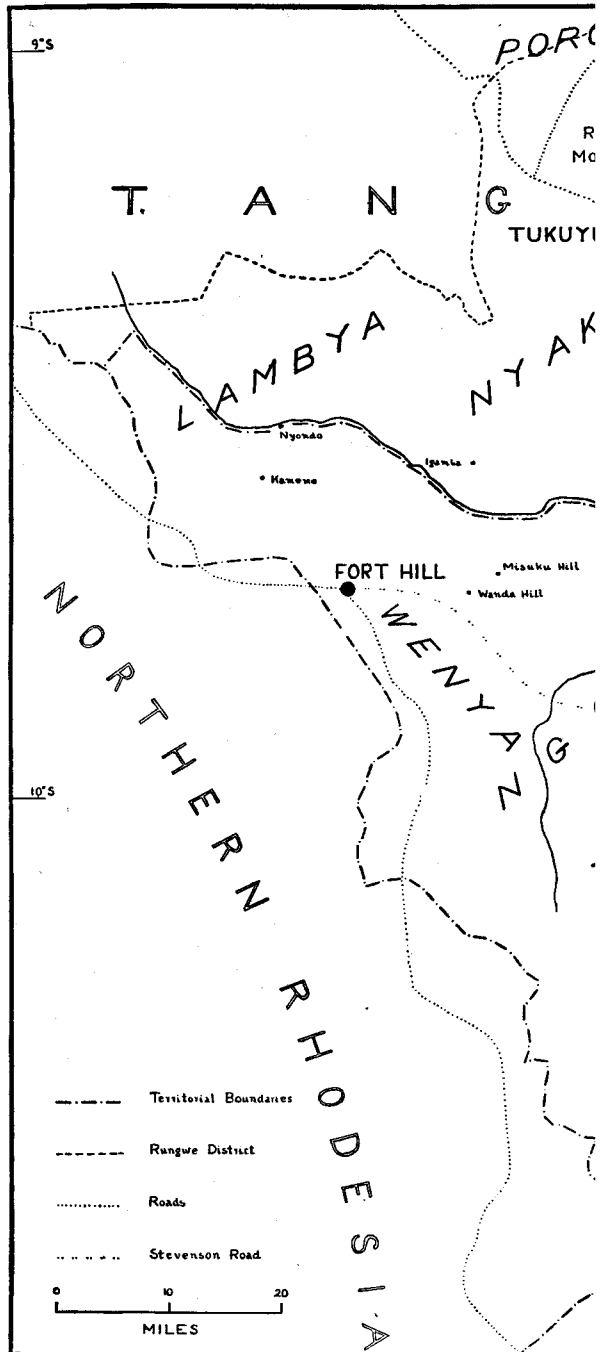
This book is concerned with the Nyakyusa.¹ What it contains is true in general terms for the people of Ngonde, but how far it is applicable to the smaller groups cited we are not certain. The Ndali, Sukwa, and Penja, are said to have long had an age-village organization; and Henga, Nyika and Kisi living intermingled with Ngonde and Nyakyusa have adopted it; but of the customs of the Wenya and Lambya we know little. Dr. Kerr Cross and Monteith Fotheringham, who travelled extensively in the area before 1890, reported that the Ndali and Sukwa (of Misuku) were very similar to the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people, but that the Lambya were different, practising shifting *citemene* cultivation, and living in stockaded villages.²

According to their own traditions the Nyakyusa and Ngonde chiefs (who trace descent from common ancestors) came ten generations ago from Kinga country, on the Livingstone mountains, and found the Rungwe and North Nyasa country already occupied. They established themselves as chiefs and have since been increasing the area of their occupation. The Kinga also affirm that their chiefs are related to those of the Nyakyusa and Ngonde, and they join with the Nyakyusa in sacrifice to common ancestors at Lubaga and LiKyala (see Map III), but the Kinga culture is quite distinct from that of the Nyakyusa and Ngonde; we stayed long enough in Kinga country to convince ourselves that the Kinga live in kinship villages and not in age-villages, and that they differ from the Nyakyusa in many other respects.

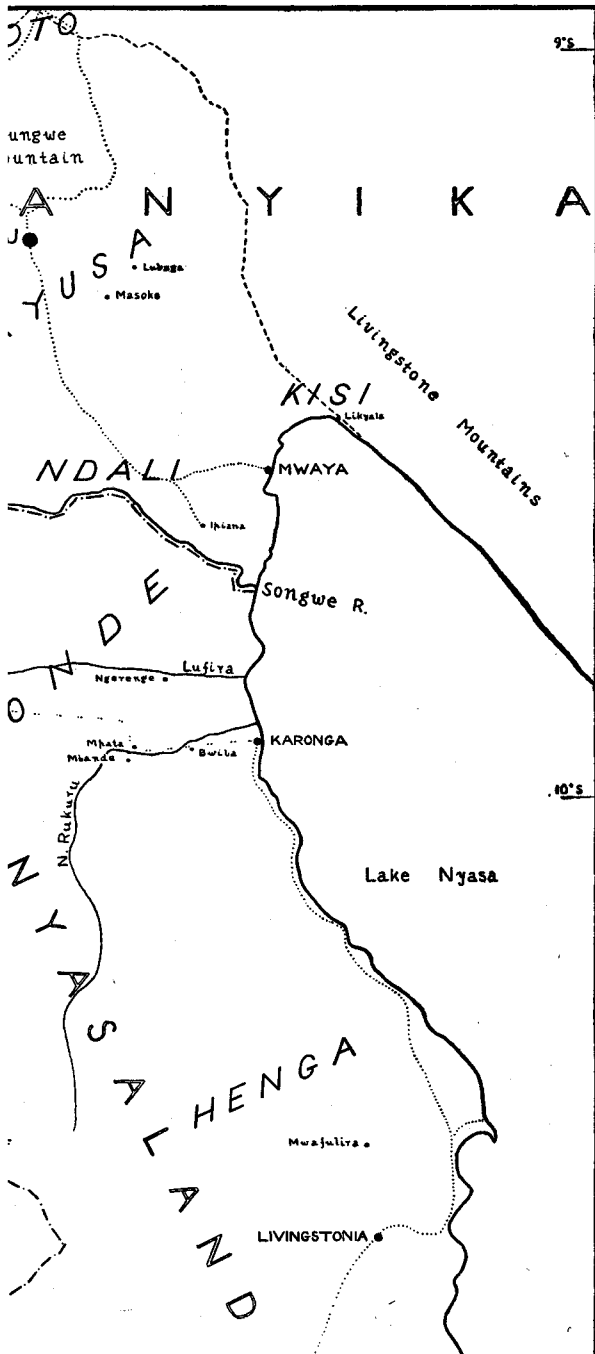
There seems little doubt that the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people have been expanding in an area not uninhabited, but sparsely inhabited, and that the assimilation of the Penja and other groups now proceeding is no new phenomenon, but part of a process which has long been going on. Within recent years over 2,000

¹ The Nyakyusa as here defined numbered 159,044 in Rungwe district at the 1931 census, and 3,732 outside the district; the Ndali 22,834, the Lambya (within Rungwe district, and not including those in Nyasaland) 12,403, and the Kisi (in Njombe district) 2,115. *Tanganyika Territory, Census of the Native Population, 1931.*

² D. Kerr-Cross, 'Geographical Notes on the Country between Lakes Nyassa, Rukwa, and Tanganyika, *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Vol. VI (1890), p. 286; L. M. Fotheringham, *Adventures in Nyassaland* (1891), pp. 129-33. Nyondo was a Lambya chief, cf. Godfrey Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.



MAP II. NGONDE AND



NYAKUYUSA COUNTRY

Drawn by
J. V. L. Rennie

Nyakyusa families have crossed the Poroto mountains and settled in Safwa and Nyika country. They have moved, primarily, to secure good pasture, fertile garden land, and accessible markets; and the accounts of Nyakyusa history which we have suggest that the first two of these motives have long been in operation. There is no sign of these Nyakyusa immigrants being absorbed by the previous occupants of the country. Indeed, were it not for the intervention of the Administration, it seems that the Nyakyusa immigrants might soon dominate the less organized Safwa and Nyika. As it is, certain of the Safwa and Nyika Native Authority Courts are conducting proceedings in Nyakyusa as well as in their own languages,¹ a fact which supports the Nyakyusa boast that all their neighbours are learning their language. Many Kinga, Mahasi, Wanji, and Poroto are said to learn to speak Nyakyusa, though there are few Nyakyusa settlers among them, since they find the language useful in external contacts.² The Kinga tell a myth of how they, together with the Nyakyusa proper, the Kukwe, the Ndali, the Ngonde, the Mahasi, the Kisi, the Pangwa, and the Bena came from a place Ilongo (in the present Bena country) which they call 'the dark house' (*nyumba nditu*), and the Penja speak of a centre of dispersion, Kina, to the north of Rungwe mountain, from which they and the Safwa and Poroto came. The people of Ngonde, for their part, trace connections with the Inamwanga and Iwa, saying that their chiefs in their journeyings left sons to rule these people; they also assert that one of their predecessors on the Lake-shore plain was a hunter from Fipa country.³

Despite these tenuous links with their eastern, northern, and north-western neighbours, the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people are, as we have said, culturally quite distinct from them. The Nyakyusa themselves are emphatic that their culture differs from the cultures of the Kinga, the Safwa, the Poroto, and the Nyika—a statement which our own observation, and the evidence of other writers, confirm.⁴ And the Ngonde differ in many respects both

¹ R. de Z. Hall, 'Local Migration in Tanganyika', *African Studies*, 4 (1945). 2,100 families had moved before 1938; 3,000 by 1941.

² This is despite the fact that Swahili is the official vernacular for Tanganyika, being the medium of instruction in Government primary schools, and the language used by the Administration.

³ Godfrey Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁴ E. Kootz-Kretschmer, *Die Safwa* (1926); J. Thomson, *To the Central African Lakes and Back* (1881), Vol. I, pp. 46-52; R. de Z. Hall, *op. cit.*; D. Kerr-Cross, *op. cit.*

from the Inamwanga and Iwa to the north-west and the Henga to the south. The affinities of the Inamwanga and Iwa appear to be with the Mambwe,¹ while the Henga are an offshoot of the Tumbuka-Kamanga people who took refuge from the Ngoni in Ngonde.² Of the Phoka who live high up in the hills south-west of Ngonde we know almost nothing, except that they are skilled cultivators, and their language is closely related to Tumbuka.

The cultural group consisting of the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people, together with small groups in Rungwe district and Ngonde largely absorbed by them, and including the Nyakyusa immigrants in Mbeya district, probably numbers about a quarter of a million.

Of the more distant cultural affinities of this group we know nothing: there are no consistent similarities in culture between it and any other known group. The elaborate age-organization, and the great ceremony of handing over secular power to the next generation, which is held every thirty years or so, suggest East African connections, while the girls' puberty and marriage ceremony (*ubusungu*) is in many ways similar to the *cisungu* ceremony of the Bemba;³ and the witchcraft beliefs are like those of the Azande⁴ and the Lovale.⁵

b. Environment and economy

The Nyakyusa-Ngonde country is fertile, well watered and, to European eyes, spectacularly beautiful, with its arc of high mountains and sparkling lakes. The Nyakyusa valley forms part of the

¹ F. F. R. Boileau and L. A. Wallace, 'The Nyasa-Tanganyika Plateau', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XIII (1899); J. C. C. Coxhead, 'The Native Tribes of North-Eastern Rhodesia, their Laws and Customs', *Royal Anthropological Institute, Occasional Paper*, No. 5, 1914; C. Goldsbury and H. Sheane, *The Great Plateau of Northern Rhodesia* (1911).

² F. D. Lugard, *The Rise of our East African Empire* (1893), Vol. I, p. 52; M. Sanderson, 'Some Marriage Customs of the WaHenga, Nyasaland', *Journal of the African Society*, Vol. XXII (1922-3); T. Cullen Young, 'The WaHenga of North Nyasaland', *Journal of the African Society*, Vol. XXIII (1923-4); 'Tribal Intermixture in Northern Nyasaland', *J.R.A.I.*, Vol. LXIII (1933); 'Habits and Customs of the Olden Days among the Tumbuka-Kamanga People', *Bantu Studies*, Vol. X (1936).

³ A. I. Richards, *Bemba Marriage and Present Economic Conditions*, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers, No. 4. (1940).

⁴ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937).

⁵ C. M. N. White, 'Witchcraft, Divination and Magic among the Balovale Tribes', *Africa*, Vol. XVIII (1948), pp. 81-104.

Great Rift valley, walled in on the east by the Livingstone mountains, which rise to 10,000 feet, and on the west by the rather lower Ndali hills. It is blocked to the north-west by Rungwe volcano and the Poroto mountains; the volcano rises from the floor of the Rift to nearly 10,000 feet, and the lowest pass over the Poroto mountains is 8,000 feet. Scattered throughout the hills are a number of small lakes formed in the craters of old volcanoes, each one like a jewel set in the green of field and pasture.

The rainfall in this valley is very heavy, averaging over 100 inches in the year, and innumerable streams rush down the mountain slopes, flooding parts of the plain during the torrential rains of March and April. The dry season is short—it scarcely exists in the hills—and such a rainfall, combined with skilful cultivation and stock-breeding, makes a large population possible. The average density for Rungwe district is over eighty persons to the square mile; the population is most concentrated on the Lakeshore plain, but stretches up into the hills to 6,000 feet. South of the Songwe the rainfall is much less—at Karonga it averages only 45 inches a year—and the country supports a smaller population, the average density for Ngonde being less than fifteen persons to the square mile.

The Nyakyusa grow a variety of crops of which the chief are bananas and plantains, finger millet, maize, cow-peas, coco-yams, cassava, sweet potatoes, ground-nuts, curcubits and, recently, rice and coffee. They also breed short-horned, humped, cattle which are carefully stalled at night, and hand-dressed to keep them free from ticks. Banana plantations stretch mile upon mile through the plain and along the crests of the ridges.¹ In them are hidden the villages, often so close together that the boundaries between them are not obvious. On the fringes of the bananas are the tilled fields, and beyond the fields the open pasture land. Unlike most of their neighbours in Central Africa the Nyakyusa practise fixed, not shifting, cultivation, and the land is kept in good heart by green manuring, rotation of crops, and periodic fallows.² Only in the cultivation of finger millet, cow-peas, and pumpkins,

¹ J. F. Elton, *The Lakes and Mountains of Eastern and Central Africa* (1879), pp. 330-1, and D. Kerr-Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 285-6, comment on their great extent.

² According to the Nyakyusa themselves the productivity of their fields is slowly diminishing. Most of them attribute this to the neglect of traditional rituals. We do not know how far their observations are objective, and how far they are biased by the tendency to glorify the past. D. H. Thwaites, in his article

planted at the break of the rains, and of the new crop, rice, is a seed-bed of ash prepared, and then it is grass and scrub which is burned; they do not fell or pollard trees to provide ash. For other crops there is no burning; the weeds are hoed in green instead; and, at a second hoeing before planting, the earth is piled into ridges or mounds to ensure drainage. Formerly, it is said, the chiefs insisted that the ridges on slopes should be made contour-wise, and recently this law has been revived. Elton, the first European to travel through the area, observed that there was 'terraced cultivation everywhere';¹ and the ridges do in fact look like terracing from a distance.

Hoeing is the work of men and boys; only quite recently have a few women, whose husbands are away in European employment, begun to hoe for themselves. And most men hoe for three or four hours a day during the greater part of the year, for crops are planted in succession. Neither old age nor high status excuses a man from this duty. Even the chief Mwaipopo, who was already grown up when the Europeans arrived in his country, hoed regularly in his fields during the years 1935-8. Iron hoes were made by Nyakyusa smiths from iron obtained from the Kinga,² but they were scarce, and some men had to use wooden hoes such as many of the women still have for weeding (*vide* Plate VII). The women are solely responsible for sowing, weeding, and reaping.

Cattle are fairly numerous:³ few men over twenty-five nowadays own none, and many older men have four or five cows in their stalls. Long ago, we were told, cattle were scarcer, some men having to marry without them, but Cotterill (1876)⁴ and Kerr-Cross (1890)⁵ both said 'cattle abound' in Nyakyusa coun-

on 'Wanyakusa Agriculture' (*The East African Agricultural Journal*, April 1944), states that 'though the soil is not being eroded to any great extent it is still being impoverished'.

¹ Elton, *op. cit.*, pp. 326, 330.

² Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 272-3. Possibly iron was also obtained from the west. Kerr Cross (*op. cit.* p. 289) saw large foundries in Nyika country before 1890. cf. Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 321 and map at the end.

³ No census of the cattle in the district had been taken when we were among the Nyakyusa. D. H. Thwaites, *op. cit.*, states that, 'The number of cattle in the district (Rungwe) in the 1941 census was about 2.3 head per taxpayer or 55 head per square mile'.

⁴ H. B. Cotterill, 'On the Nyasa and a Journey from the North End to Zanzibar', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. XXII (1878).

⁵ D. Kerr-Cross, 'Crater-lakes north of Lake Nyassa', *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. V (1895), p. 119.

try, and Lugard speaks of 'enormous herds' in 1888¹ which a rinderpest epidemic decimated in 1892.² A few Kukwe keep one or two sheep, but we saw no goats at all in Rungwe district,³ and neither sheep nor goats figure in ritual: cattle and fowls provide flesh for sacrifice. Every woman keeps fowls, as every man seeks to own cattle.

With curds and meat from their cattle, with fowls, fish, bananas, grain, pulses, roots and curcubits, as well as bean tops and pumpkin tops, and—less generally—fruit, the Nyakyusa are exceptionally well fed. Since the dry season is so short and two crops of maize and pulses are grown in the year, there are no 'hunger months' such as the Bemba and many other African peoples experience. Shortages and famine occur, but rarely. All the early travellers comment on the quantities of food available in Nyakyusa country.⁴

c. Relations with the outside world

Perhaps the most significant fact in the history of the Nyakyusa is their long isolation, which is mainly the result of their geographical position. Surrounded on three sides by high mountains, and on the fourth by the stormy head waters of the Lake,⁵ the district was largely cut off from the outside world. Slave caravans passed to the north, the west, and the south, but never through Nyakyusa country; and though they were repeatedly attacked by the Sangu, who are said to have raided as far as the Nyasa plain,⁶ and several times by the Ngoni, the Nyakyusa repulsed both peoples. Certain of the Kukwe chiefs were forced for a period to pay tribute to the Sangu chief, Merere; but according to their own account none did so for long, and some never paid at all. Kerr-Cross comments on the contrast before 1890 between the unfortified villages of the Nyakyusa and Ndali, and those of the Lambya and Nyika, who, living in open country and harried

¹ Lugard, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

² H. H. Johnston, *British Central Africa* (1897), p. 430; D. Kerr-Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

³ Fotheringham, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 25, mentions goats in Ngonde.

⁴ See especially, Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 268, 274; Lugard, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 131.

⁵ In 1946 a Lake steamer, the *Vipya*, sank in a storm near Karonga with heavy loss of life.

⁶ Kerr Cross, *op. cit.*, pp. 119-20.

by the Arabs and Bemba, built their huts within a stockade.¹ According to Thomson, the Nyakyusa were unaware even of the existence of Lake Tanganyika in 1879 and their more distant eastern neighbours, the Pangwa, Bena, and Hehe had no communication with them.²

Unlike the Nyakyusa, the people of Ngonde were trading with the coast long before the arrival of the Europeans, a fact which had a profound effect on their political institutions;³ but even they did not suffer from the attacks of slavers until *after* Europeans were established in Karonga.

From the point of view of the Nyakyusa-Ngonde people the Europeans came just in time. It was the establishment of British control in Nyasaland which prevented the complete destruction of the people of Ngonde by the slavers, and it is likely that the Nyakyusa also were saved by European intervention, for the raids of Arab slavers and their Sangu allies were becoming serious in Kukwe country in 1889⁴ before the German annexation.

The first Europeans known to have sighted Nyakyusa country were a party from the Livingstonia mission (then established at the south of Lake Nyasa) who circumnavigated the Lake in the mission steamer, the *Ilala*, in 1875. They anchored off the north shore but did not land.⁵ Two years later, the same steamer sailed by two famous missionaries, Dr. Stewart (of Lovedale) and Dr. Laws (of Livingstonia), landed Frederick Elton, H.B.M. Consul at Mozambique, and a party near the Mbaka mouth.⁶ Elton and his party travelled through Selya and Kukwe country to the fort of the Sangu chief, Merere, and thence started for the coast. Elton died on the road, but some of the others got through.⁷ In 1879 Joseph Thomson (aged 20), alone with his carriers, travelled through Hehe and Bena country, crossed the Livingstone moun-

¹ D. Kerr-Cross, 'Geographical Notes on the Country between Lakes Nyassa, Rukwa, and Tanganyika', *The Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Vol. VI (1890), pp. 286-7; Fotheringham, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-5; 269.

² Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 248, 276.

³ Godfrey Wilson, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

⁴ Fotheringham, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-41, 288. The Sangu had previously been occupied in a prolonged war with the Hehe. cf. Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 374; Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 229-34.

⁵ E. D. Young, 'On a recent Sojourn at Lake Nyassa', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol. XXI (1877), pp. 230-1.

⁶ J. Stewart, 'The Second Circumnavigation of Lake Nyassa', *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, 1879, pp. 289-304.

⁷ Elton, *op. cit.*, pp. 318-44; Cotterill, *op. cit.*

tains to the north-east corner of Nyasa, and went on through Nyakyusa country to Lake Tanganyika.¹

Despite the isolation of the Nyakyusa and their own fear of travelling in foreign chiefdoms, they were not inhospitable to these white strangers: Elton and all his party (some of whom were delayed by illness and travelled separately), and later Thomson, walked up the Nyakyusa valley in safety though it was 'teeming with armed warriors', who carried 'most cruel-looking spears'. Elton remarks that 'the people of Konde, though not unfriendly, are passively obstructive, and being in want of nothing are disinclined to render any services whatsoever to strangers'.² But Thomson appears to have been on the best of terms with the Nyakyusa he met. The Kukwe fled from their villages at Thomson's approach, but were usually persuaded to return.³

After these journeys of discovery, mission work and trade developed quickly. The African Lakes Corporation, a company formed to develop legitimate trade in Central Africa as a means of combating the slave trade, established a station at Karonga; and a road was surveyed from Karonga through to Lake Tanganyika.⁴ Out-stations of the Livingstonia mission were set up at Chirenji (Mwini Wanda) in the hills north-west of Karonga, and at Kararamuka near Tukuyu.⁵ Meantime, an Arab slaver, Mlozi, had settled in Ngonde, and a protracted struggle ensued between him and his Henga allies on the one side, and the people of Ngonde and the Europeans on the other, during which many Ngonde were enslaved or killed and their villages destroyed. Five thousand Nyakyusa spearmen came to the aid of the Europeans but, being more concerned with loot than with the defeat of the Arabs, they returned home with the goods they had taken instead of pursuing Mlozi and his men when they had the chance to do so.⁶ Lord (then Captain) Lugard was for some months in command of the exiguous European force and its allies, and nearly

¹ Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 260-86.

² Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

³ Thomson, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 281-2.

⁴ Fotheringham, *op. cit.*; F. L. M. Moir, *After Livingstone* (1923).

⁵ D. Kerr-Cross, 'Geographical Notes on the Country between Lakes Nyassa, Rukwa, and Tanganyika', *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Vol. VI, 1890, pp. 281-93.

⁶ Fotheringham, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-23.

died of wounds and fever. Because the Europeans lacked arms the war dragged on,¹ and the power of the slavers was finally broken only in 1895, when Sir Harry Johnston came up the Lake with a well-armed force.²

German missionaries of the Berlin and Moravian missions arrived in 1891, and established themselves at a number of stations in Nyakyusa country.³ The Songwe had by that time been agreed upon as the boundary between Nyasaland and German East Africa, and the German administration followed hard on the heels of the missionaries.⁴ Twenty years later war broke out between England and Germany; there was fighting throughout Rungwe district, and many Nyakyusa were impressed as carriers. The absorption of the Nyakyusa into a world society was considerably accelerated by war.

d. The form of Nyakyusa society

Not only was the Nyakyusa valley long isolated from the outside world, but it was divided into a number of small, independent chiefdoms, whose members had few dealings with people beyond their own chiefdoms and those immediately adjoining. Each family produced for its own needs, so that trade was the merest trickle; and marriage outside the boundaries of the chiefdom was discouraged, since beyond the jurisdiction of one's own chief there was no security for life and property. A plea against a man of a neighbouring chiefdom might not be heard by the defendant's chief. Nyakyusa men enlarged to us on the dangers and difficulties of travelling even twenty miles from home, before the coming of the Europeans; a journey from Selya to Tukuyu (twenty-five miles) was said to take three days, because travellers had to seek cover so often.

The number and size of chiefdoms varied; for a continuous process of splitting, together with periodical conquest and re-absorption, was going on and, as we have seen, the area of Nyakyusa occupation was expanding. In 1938 the Nyakyusa themselves

¹ Lugard, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 51-167.

² H. H. Johnston, *British Central Africa* (1897), p. 143.

³ A. Merensky, *Deutsche Arbeit am Njassa* (1894); J. T. Hamilton, *Twenty Years of Pioneer Missions in Nyasaland* (1912).

⁴ F. Fülleborn, *Deutsch Ost-Afrika*, Band IX (1906).

recognized over 100 chiefdoms, mustering anything from 100 to 3,000 adult men apiece.

Although no centralized political authority existed before the German occupation, certain groups of chiefdoms joined in common rituals directed to common ancestors. We traced four such centres of worship among the Nyakyusa; the most important being Lubaga, in the middle of the valley, where Kinga priests (from the top of the Livingstone mountains) join with many Nyakyusa chiefdoms in sacrifice to Lwembe, who is claimed as the ancestor both of the chiefs of the Nyakyusa proper, and of the Kinga. At LiKyala, on the Lake-shore plain, Kinga also join in sacrifice with the surrounding Nyakyusa chiefdoms. In Ngonde the chief connected with a similar centre of worship, Mbande, developed far-reaching secular as well as religious powers; and by the time the Europeans arrived he was established as a paramount chief with the title of the Kyungu. This development was directly connected with the fact that Ngonde traded with the outside world, and that their Kyungu, through his control of ivory, was able also to control the guns and cloth which came into the country:¹ the Nyakyusa, remaining isolated, remained politically disunited.

Besides sacrificing to a distant ancestor in company with the representatives of a large group of chiefdoms, two or more chiefs who are neighbours participate in a sacrifice at the grove in which their common father, or grandfather, is buried. Thus common worship links both large groups of chiefdoms, whose chiefs are more or less distantly related, and small groups of contiguous chiefdoms whose chiefs are close kinsmen. The sacrifices made are to the chiefs of immediately preceding generations, and to certain great heroes of the distant past, such as Lwembe and Kyala.

All these sacrifices are believed to bring rain and fertility, for the well-being of each chiefdom is thought to be bound up with the health of the chief and the goodwill of his ancestors.

The Nyakyusa are all agreed that their chiefs, *abanyafyale*, are 'strangers' who came down from the Livingstone mountains eight or ten generations ago, and found the valley already occupied by people who had no knowledge of fire, but ate their food raw. The chiefs brought fire with them—some say, cattle also;

¹ Godfrey Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 39-48.

and by virtue of this great benefit were accepted as chiefs. Such is the myth (*vide infra*, p. 26). It is remembered that the chiefs of different groups such as the Nyakyusa proper, the Kukwe, the Lugulu, and the Saku arrived at different times, but of the proportion of the immigrants to the former occupants, and of the proportion of men to women in the invading groups, we learnt nothing. Some suggest that the chiefs were lighter in colour than the previous inhabitants of the valley,¹ and the term *abatitu*, 'black people', is used for commoners as contrasted with chiefs. But chiefs intermarry freely with commoners and there is no observable difference in physical type between them and their people to-day. The Nyakyusa are without a clan system, and though kinship with a chief may be remembered for three (or perhaps even four) generations, the body of 'kinsmen of the chief' is not defined as it is in tribes which have a 'royal clan' like the Bemba or Pondo. Moreover, among the Nyakyusa the chief's advisers are never his kinsmen, but commoners. Sons or grandsons of a chief are ineligible as village headmen, who are the counsellors of the chief, and who had in the past very great control over him. The contrast is made between chiefs, *abanyafyale*, on the one hand, and commoners, *amafumu*, on the other, and the leaders of villages, chosen each generation by their predecessors (*vide infra*, p. 23), are the *amafumu par excellence*.² Words from this *-fumu* root mean 'chief' in various central Bantu languages (Bemba, Tumbuka, Nyanja); and it is tempting to suppose that the *amafumu* were the old chiefs conquered by the invading *abanyafyale*, but that is only a supposition. The important point for the contemporary social structure is that the village leaders are *commoners*; that their position is not hereditary, since they are selected afresh each generation; and that formerly they had very great power over the chief. This power has diminished considerably with the development of European administration. The Nyakyusa, indeed, were astounded to be told that the British

¹ cf. Godfrey Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 10 (footnote).

² For this reason *ulifumu* was translated by Godfrey Wilson as 'great commoner', in 'An Introduction to Nyakyusa Society', *Bantu Studies*, Vol. X (1936), and other papers, but this translation has considerable difficulties, and I have preferred to translate *ulifumu* as 'village headman' in the contexts in which it means the leader of the village, and 'commoner' or 'villager' in other contexts. It must be clearly understood that 'village headman' as used in this book means something quite different from 'headman' as used by the Administration (*vide infra*, p. 258).

constitution (about which they asked many questions) was a democratic one; for, they said, the Administration always supported the chiefs against the commoners.

The villages to which commoner leaders are appointed differ from all other Bantu villages of which we have knowledge in that they consist of groups of age-mates, not groups of kinsmen; boys build with contemporaries and remain with them through life; girls join the villages of their husbands at marriage; therefore relatives, other than husband and wife and young children, do not live together. Nevertheless kinship ties are important, for property circulates within the kinship group rather than within the village, and kinsmen are believed to be mystically interdependent, in a way in which fellow villagers are not. The most prized possession of the Nyakyusa are cattle, for cattle enable a man to marry, to live in comfort, to gain prestige by feasting his friends; and cattle pass along the roads of kinship. They pass between brothers, and half-brothers, and the sons of brothers; between fathers and sons; and between affines. Kinsmen also participate in common rituals, praying to common ancestors, and seeking protection from mystical dangers which are thought to travel, like cattle, along the roads of kinship. Ever fearful lest a quarrel among them should bring misfortune on all, they strive to live in harmony.

The range of kinship recognized varies somewhat with the status of the family concerned and the proximity and personalities of its members, but, generally speaking, economic and religious co-operation link the descendants of a common grandfather, and marriage between the descendants of a common great-grandfather is excluded. A legal marriage is effected by the passage of cattle from the groom's group to the bride's, and it is this passage which is said to create kinship (*ubukamu*), with the consequent mystical interdependence, between a man and his wife, and between the one partner in a marriage and the close kinsmen of the other. Polygyny is the ideal of every pagan, and it is made possible by the ten years' difference in the average marriage age of men and women. Girls are betrothed very young and finally join their husbands at puberty, while few pagan men marry under twenty-five. Inherited cattle are controlled by the older generation and polygyny is the prerogative of age. For property passes not directly from father to son, but from brother to brother,

through each group of full brothers, until, when the last full brother is dead, and the son of the eldest is an adult, the family stock comes to him. Thus few men under forty (other than chiefs) have more than one wife. Of 3,000 tax-payers (presumed to be 18 years and over) in Selya, 34 per cent were bachelors, 37 per cent monogamists, and 29 per cent polygynists. Plural marriages breed wealth, for the polygynist is likely to command the labour of many sons as well as several wives, and in due course he expects to receive the marriage cattle of many daughters.

Social status turns primarily on age, sex, and the control and distribution of wealth. As we have seen, the position of a chief is hereditary, but kinship with a chief does not carry office, nor are the kinsmen of chiefs conspicuously wealthy. Every man in turn hopes to control the property attaching to the house into which he was born, and all who live long enough do so. But there is a delayed right of primogeniture, for the senior son of a senior son inherits the bulk of the family stock when it passes to his generation, and the eldest of each group of full brothers has a special claim to the cattle coming in from the marriages of his sisters.

Seniority, whether within the context of the lineage, or of the hierarchy of age-villages, is something respected in itself, but wealth carries authority and prestige only in so far as it is used generously, in hospitality: one man is great and distinguished (*nsisya*) because he feeds people, another of little account because he is poor or mean.

Women occupy a position very subordinate to men in Nyakyusa society. They play no part in public life, except in so far as the two great wives of a chief, and the first wife of a village headman co-operate with their husbands in rituals; and in the relationship of husband and wife, as well as in that of father and daughter, a woman is expected to show obedience and respect. Her deference is expressed conventionally in her crouching to greet men (*vide* Plate IX), and in her use of the submissive *taa* ('Yes, my lord') when addressed by them. Having no great chiefs and little regard for rank, Nyakyusa men show no trace of subservience in their manner to each other, but they expect a meek compliance from all women. The only relationships with a male in which a woman may in some measure assert herself are those which she has with a brother, and with a brother's sons. Leader-