

THE CHIGA OF WESTERN UGANDA

May M. Edel

AFRICAN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES OF
THE 20TH CENTURY



AFRICAN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDIES
OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Volume 21

THE CHIGA OF WESTERN UGANDA



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

THE CHIGA OF WESTERN UGANDA

MAY M. EDEL

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1957 by Oxford University Press for the International African Institute.

This edition first published in 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 1957 International African Institute

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-8153-8713-8 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-429-48813-9 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-138-58714-4 (Volume 21) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-50414-3 (Volume 21) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and would welcome correspondence from those they have been unable to trace.

THE CHIGA OF
WESTERN UGANDA

BY

MAY MANDELBAUM EDEL

Published for the

INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN INSTITUTE

by the

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

NEW YORK TORONTO

1957

Oxford University Press, Amen House, London E.C.4

GLASGOW NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE WELLINGTON
BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS KARACHI
CAPE TOWN IBADAN NAIROBI ACCRA SINGAPORE

Printed in Great Britain

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	vii
I INTRODUCTION	i
II SOCIAL STRUCTURE	8
III KINSHIP	29
IV MARRIAGE	50
V ECONOMICS	79
VI SOCIAL CONTROL	112
VII RELIGION	129
VIII EDUCATION	173
INDEX	198

Map showing distribution of homesteads and fields 195

Diagram showing lineage membership (Abajura lineage of Kayundu clan) 196-7



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

FOREWORD

THE field work on which this monograph is based was done under the auspices of the National Research Council, which granted me a Fellowship for research in Uganda in 1932-3. Their award was supplemented by a grant from the Anthropology Department at Columbia University. I wish to express my gratitude for this financial support to the institutions involved, and also my deep indebtedness to the late Professor Franz Boas, who made it all possible. I am grateful too to all the others who helped me on the way, as teachers, advisers, consultants—Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead particularly, and also Audrey Richards, Diedrich Westermann, B. Malinowski, and Lucy Mair—and to those, British and Chiga alike, who gave me their friendship, help, and confidence during my year in Kigezi. I want especially to thank Professor Daryll Forde and Mrs. Beatrice Wyatt of the International African Institute, who have given most generously of their time and effort in editing and preparing my manuscript for publication. To all of these, and to the continued encouragement and helpful advice and criticism of my husband, I owe whatever there may be of value in this study.

Additional matter—in particular a detailed account of Chiga material culture—not included in the present book, has been filed at the Uganda Museum, Kampala, by the courtesy of the Curator, Dr. Wachsmann, where it is available for study and research purposes.

MAY M. EDEL

New York City, 1956.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1

INTRODUCTION

THE western part of Uganda is a land of great contrasts. There are enormous snow-clad peaks, and low steaming valleys; great rolling plains of elephant grass, and forests of tall trees and jungle creepers, where hordes of monkeys chatter and tease at the passers-by. To the south the land rises sharply and there, above a steep escarpment, some 7,000 feet above sea-level, is Kigezi county, home of the Chiga. A few of them live in tiny individual clearings in the Kayonza forest district of the north-west; some have moved north into the grassy plains of Mpororo, where their cattle can grow more sleek and numerous. But most of the Chiga, well over 100,000 by all estimates, live clustered in small hamlets in the eastern half of the province, which is certainly the most densely settled and intensively cultivated part of Uganda.

Little of this Chiga country is level. The hills lie in great chains of ridges, with rounded crests and deeply grooved sides. Between them wind sluggish streams bordered by papyrus swamps. Compounds lie in groups along the top and slopes of the hills, their combined fields stretching in terraced patches of brown and green over the sides of neighbouring hills. Between the cultivated areas are stretches of scrubby bush-land. Slash-and-burn farming, practised for generations, has kept the land denuded of trees, so that one sees very few, except for the groves of Australian black wattle that have begun to crown some of the hill-tops in a government reforestation programme. This is millet country, too cold for bananas, too hilly for good pasturage. It is here, directly on the Equator, that the Chiga grow their millet and corn and peas, and tend their flocks of sheep and goats, and their few rather scrawny cattle. In good years there is plenty of millet and honey beer, and people may even eat meat from time to time. In bad years, which come all too often, they must tighten their belts and wait for the next harvest.

The Chiga people speak a Bantu dialect which is related to Nyoro. Except for a few simple consonant shifts it is virtually

identical with that spoken in Ankole and Mpororo. Their cultural similarities with these neighbours to the north, and with Ruanda to the south, are profound. They live in similar beehive-shaped, grass-thatched huts, arranged in circular compounds with fences of living trees. Songs and dances are borrowed back and forth, as are many fashions in clothing, hair styles—even religion. The women working in the fields with their long-handled hoes; the growing fields of millet and maize and beans; the smooth-cropped polls, little hair tufts, or tight clay-packed curls; the leather skirts and many anklets of the women, and the cowskins slung from the shoulders of the men; the ubiquitous spear, tight-clenched in every man's right hand . . . all these are familiar from many parts of this area. So are many aspects of Chiga social life—the polygynous patriarchal households, the far-flung exogamous patrilineal clans, the bride-price payments, the worship of ancestral spirits. All these are characteristic not only of their neighbours, but of very large areas in East Africa.

But there is also a very important difference between the Chiga and their immediate neighbours. For in both Ankole and Ruanda the population is divided into distinct castes. The peasants, clearly akin to the Chiga, are ruled by pastoral overlords who, in physical type as well as in their mode of life, appear to be just what local legend calls them—a distinct, intrusive, conquering people.

The Chiga have no such overlords. They are an independent farming people. This independence they and their neighbours ascribe to their fierceness in war, their 'disloyalty' and independence of spirit. Undoubtedly their mountain home has also contributed to it—not so much by difficulty of access as in providing no pasturage good enough to support even a limited number of pastoral chiefs.

Like a few other mountain-dwellers in Ruanda, the Chiga must represent a surviving enclave of the original population which elsewhere hereabouts has come under the domination of the 'Hamitic' Hima and Tutsi, the aristocrats who rule the somewhat feudal and centralized states which have long been familiar to us as characteristic of this region. Even the cattle of the Chiga appear to be 'pre-Hamitic'; for most of them are short-horned, as befits the cattle of peasants, rather than the long-horned type to be found in the grassy plains of their pastoral neighbours.

whose peasants are usually denied the privilege of keeping cows at all.

As an independent one-class peasant people in this region of sharp caste differentiation, the Chiga are of particular historical and comparative interest. Naturally, we cannot read their culture as it stands in the twentieth century—even apart from recent European-influenced changes—as representative in detail of the way of life once established here. There have been too many influences, too much contact, for that to be the case. However, I am inclined now to be less sceptical than I was when I did my field study of the time-depth of their basically anarchic structure. At that time it seemed to me necessary to allow a high probability to the possibility that there had been cultural breakdown under the constant pressure of warfare both with Ruanda and Ankole, and the moving about of large groups to escape attempts at subjugation and demands for tribute. However, parallel pictures of structured or ordered anarchy, on a very similar basis of fissioning, segmentary lineages, have now been described and analysed for other peoples of north-east Africa, such as the Nuer, so that what appeared to be a less centralized clan structure by comparison with the south-east emerges as a relatively common pattern of the north-east, and one which therefore may well be of long standing here.

The Chiga are not a united people. There is no tribal organization, and there is much inter-clan fighting. There are minor variations in custom and even in dialect in different parts of the country. But to their neighbours, as well as to themselves, they are a distinct people. To the chiefs of Ruanda who have several times tried to conquer them, to exact tribute, or to dominate them through gifts of cattle and similar patronage, they are 'those rebellious Hima', while to their neighbours of the north they are dangerous sorcerers, referred to by scurrilous epithets and deeply feared. To themselves they are simply the independent people from Chiga.

During the early part of the twentieth century there was open warfare with Ruanda. The Nyabingi cult, of which we shall hear a great deal more later on, was growing into a political force, directed against the rulers of Ruanda. The Chiga were being further harassed by a series of organized raids by Pygmy peoples who were hiding out in the forest country to the north-west and

across the border in the Congo. The Pygmy raids seemed particularly terrible to the Chiga because they were entirely destructive. The Pygmies were not interested in stealing live cattle; they slaughtered all they could lay hands on, and burned and destroyed all the villages in their path. Many people fled from their houses at that time, taking refuge in papyrus swamps or crude shelters in the uncleared bush. Some of the people near the lake shore took refuge on the islands, towing their cattle after them, and thus escaped the heaviest brunt of the fighting. In many places homes and families were so broken up that today many young people are ignorant of their relationships. Throughout this period of protracted fighting, many people took advantage of the situation to push their own feuds, in some cases actually siding with the Pygmies against their traditional Chiga enemies.

While the Chiga were being harried in the south, they were successfully pushing their own boundaries out toward the north. This was not a general tribal movement. Portions of clans moved piecemeal into territory which was first claimed by raids. The groups which have moved into the fertile plains north of the mountains have grown more wealthy as their cattle have multiplied in the excellent pasturage. Many have taken on pastoral ways of speech and life to match this; but they and their children are still known as Chiga, nor do they accept the overlordship of the rulers of Mpororo. These northern rulers too from time to time attempted to dominate or conquer them. Many Chiga still boast of family participation in the murder of two sons of Kahaya, a chief of Mpororo, who were sent down to exact tribute from the Chiga and mysteriously disappeared. And many still swear by Kahaya—not as a former overlord, but as their enemy, just as others swear by the lake, which has often drowned their relatives.

At the time when I lived among the Chiga, in 1933, their contacts with European civilization were all very recent and, in superficial ways, not very conspicuous. Kabale station was set up in 1913, and the missions were only a little older. There was little acquaintance with money. Apart from a short, wrapped cotton shirt popular with the young men, few people wore cloth garments or used any kind of store-bought goods. And there were no Europeans in the district other than government officers and missionaries. But far-reaching influences were actually at

work, and the less obvious consequences of this official contact were already considerable.

Open feuds had been ruled out, which lessened, though it by no means did away with, 'murders'; this made possible a new freedom of movement within the country, of which increasing advantage was being taken. Local courts under Ganda-trained chiefs were widely resorted to. The head-tax was a first step towards a money economy, which was beginning to have an effect on working habits and exchange. Forced limitation of bride-price payments was influencing marriage arrangements, so that more young men were finding it possible to get brides of their own.

Much more important was the effect of the comprehensive ban on religious practices, introduced as a consequence of the uprisings of the previous two decades. The whole cult of the Nyabingi spirits was deemed a subversive secret society; most of its practitioners were captured and taken as prisoners to Kampala; and many other religious practices were forbidden. The result is that overt religious practices dwindled to nothing. The spirit huts were destroyed, no one wore even ordinary charms, and Christianity flourished.

During the greater part of my year among the Chiga, I lived in the village of Bufuka. This is a hamlet of some sixteen families, linked by close ties to some twenty-odd other related families who lived nearby. Bufuka is a high peninsula, sloping steeply to the papyrus-rimmed shore of a beautiful island-studded lake, Bunyonyi, place of the little birds. The lake plays only a small part in Bufuka living. There is a little fishing, and only a few people trap and smoke frogs. The one aspect of Bufuka life into which the lake does enter to any extent is in the use of the canoe. At that time transportation by water was common; most families owned some sort of canoe, and depended upon it to reach some of their outlying fields. Moreover, ferrying provided some cash income from time to time for many of the men, who ferried the District Officer and native officials on their regular visits of inspection. But apart from this, life in Bufuka was like that of most other Chiga villages. The basic diet was derived from the produce of the fields, as it would be in any other Chiga village. My friends in Bufuka had no greater affection for the water, for all its attractive availability, than any of their less fortunate

fellow Chiga, whose water supply was often a considerable distance away—and a muddy mess at best. Washing was as carefully avoided, and the drinking of plain water as disdainfully shunned, in Bufuka as anywhere in the region.

The houses in Bufuka are grouped along the peninsula; their fields lie interspersed with those of their nearest neighbours farther along the lake shore and a little distance inland. Here the women spend most of their days from dawn till early afternoon. Often they take the younger children with them, unless they can arrange to leave them in the care of an old man or older sibling at home. The older children may go along to help, or go off separately to tend the flocks and herds. The six-year-old boys trail along with the twelve-year-old herders when the latter condescend to tolerate their presence. Most men also are away by day, fetching materials for house-building, arranging the purchase of a hoe, or just drinking beer, so that by day the houses and courtyards are often very quiet.

After four o'clock, when most women come home from the fields, smoke rises through the straw roof-tops throughout the village, greetings and messages are called across the courts and paths, and sometimes quarrels are aired. But after dusk the village grows very quiet again. As dark comes on and the last of the cows are herded into the compounds, the entrances are barred, and soon after house doors are put up and the fires burn low. There is no artificial lighting—nothing but brief-lived rush torches—and no one except thieves and witches is likely to go about on ordinary nights. When the moon is full, girls may take advantage of its light to dance and visit in the evening. And when there is a wedding or other festive occasion, people will gather to feast, to drink beer, and to dance. Otherwise, each family spends the evening quietly at its own fireside, eating, talking, perhaps telling stories, till children and adults fall off to sleep.

My house in Bufuka was a compound built for me well in the centre of the hamlet. My living arrangements were those of an individual of some wealth and position. I had a large compound, with several houses and numerous retainers. (The problem finally became one of limiting the number of my retainers' retainers—they tended to multiply by a system of continuously extending apprenticeships.) My cook was not a Chiga, but the rest of my staff were, and many were recruited from Bufuka and nearby

villages. My closest contacts were with members of one network of patrilineal kin, that of a large lineage of the Abayundu clan. However, I had a substantial 'in' with the important and extensive Abasigi, for a local schoolmaster who lived in Bufuka belonged to an important family of that clan. Despite his Christianity, he was well-liked, well-respected and even trusted by his kinsmen, so that his friendship proved invaluable to me. He made it possible for me to speak in confidence to several older men on religious topics which would otherwise have been closed to me. Another valued friend who widened my circle of contacts was Mukombe, a senior chief and a most intelligent and sympathetic man, with genuine intellectual curiosity, who was always interested and helpful. But I owed most, perhaps, to one family in Bufuka, whose womenfolk befriended me as mothers, and one of whose daughters came to live in my compound, to be my companion, my social secretary and special mentor.

My work in Bufuka was conducted entirely in the Chiga language. This was not so much a matter of principle—there were many occasions when I should have been happy to have had the services of an interpreter—but of simple necessity. No one but a chief or two and a few members of my house-staff spoke any Swahili—which in any case would have improved matters very little—and English was known to only a few boys in the higher forms at the government school. One of them worked with me for a while at the beginning of my stay, shortening the period I needed to learn the language enough to be on my own, but he did not come from a nearby village, and his continued presence would have been intrusive rather than helpful.

The account of the Chiga as I present it here is for the most part a picture of life as it was still being lived when I was there in 1933. Where significant changes were already taking place, I tried to get as full a picture as possible of the established older ways, while these were still within most people's memory and many people's practice. The various directions of change that were taking place at that time are discussed in the contexts in which they seemed to me most relevant, and will therefore be found in various chapters throughout the book.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

THE structure of Chiga society is polysegmentary. It is based on a fissioning lineage system similar in many ways to that which has been described for the Nuer and other peoples in northern East Africa. Among the Chiga, the process reaches from the individual household, which contains the dividing lines of future separation within its unity, to the exogamous clans, which are linked segments of larger totemic groups. The individual is thus a member of a whole series of patrilineal groups, each a segment of the next larger unit, each reckoned back to a successively more remote common ancestor. There is the small group of immediate agnatic kinsmen whose mutual social contacts and obligations are extensive and deep; and there are increasingly larger lineage groups whose members' common social responsibilities are correspondingly less intense. The group structure is all patrilineal. Residence is largely within the extended lineage, marriage bonds are limited by clan exogamy, wars and feuds are patterned along lines of clan and lineage cleavage. The individual has links with other, non-agnatic kinsmen through his mother and through his wife; and he has personal bonds with various non-relatives created by formal pacts of blood-brotherhood. But these do not constitute any sort of group structure; they are unique for each individual. There is no formal organized political unity at any level, but such joint responsibility or corporate action as there is, is structured along lineage lines.

HOUSEHOLD

The patriarchal household (*eka*) is the basic social unit. Physically, the household consists of a circle of huts connected by a fence of live bushes. The whole forms an enclosed compound, with only one gateway. The closed circle of the compound symbolizes the unity of the household. Within it are the homes of the living members and the spirit huts of the ancestors; in the centre is the fire where the master of the household sits to warm

himself, and where he takes his meals when the weather permits. Here wedding feasts and mourning rites are held, diviners and medicine men practise their skills, beer is brewed and drunk, and guests are entertained. In the courtyard stand the family grain bins, separate ones for all the separate huts, and here the cows are kept safe for the night, guarded by piled-up branches at the gateway and the vigilance of the household head, who gets up many times during the night to look out into his compound and see that all is well.

Outside the compound is another courtyard, a flat, dry place where grain can be spread to dry, or bundles of rushes sewn into mats. Here a casual passer-by may stop to chat; but entering the compound is a formal visit, an intrusion by one who is not invited, unless he be a very trusted friend.

The nucleus of the household is an extended patriarchal family. The head of the household is the oldest male. He may be the father, or the eldest of a group of brothers. His married sons normally live in the same compound, in houses of their own which may be part of the same circle, or in a kind of annexe attached to it. Each wife, and each son's wife, has a house of her own; men have no separate houses for sleeping or entertaining, but spend their time in rotation in the huts of their various wives. Children live in their own mothers' houses until they are grown up. A son stays on in his mother's house for a few months after his marriage, while his bride learns the ways of his family. A daughter leaves her parents' home when she is married, going to take her place in her husband's family, where, if all goes well, she will spend the rest of her days.

A wife is definitely part of her husband's family group. The conclusion of the marriage rites assimilates her to it completely. She remains a part of it even after her husband's death, as a wife to one of his younger sons or, in her later years, as a dowager mother. With respect to her own father's household, her household-of-origin, her status changes sharply when she marries. Although she remains a kinswoman there, it is no longer her home. When she comes there on a visit, or even if she lives there for a while pending a possible divorce, she is an outsider, not a member. All sorts of disabilities and tabus hem her in.

The household may also contain persons who are not kinsmen, but complete outsiders. Slaves, for example, both male and

female, were sometimes kept. They were captured in war or purchased, most often from the neighbouring Nyaruanda. A slave worked for the master of the household, or for some particular wife to whom he or she was assigned. A male slave might sometimes be allowed access to a woman, but seldom had a wife of his own. The status of a female slave varied; in some cases she remained a handmaiden; in other cases she was actually accepted as a wife and had a house and fields of her own. The children of slave women were full members of the household and of the family. If their mother had no special designated husband, they counted as the master's children. Male or female slaves who were acquired as young children were generally treated as children of the family and exogamous marriages were arranged for them.

There might also be temporary outsiders in a household, mostly youths come to serve as herdboys or apprentices, or children being reared for a time by maternal kinsmen. Sometimes such youngsters were not claimed back by their original patrilineal kin and became adoptive members of the new household. Such adoption was entirely informal and was marked by no rites. Older youths who attached themselves to a household might stay on and eventually marry into the community, setting up their own separate households nearby.

Every extended patriarchal household is in most respects a single social unit, and one which has considerable independence. It has its own cows, its flocks of sheep and goats, its own fields, spread among those of its neighbours along the slopes of the surrounding hillsides. Economically, it is independent and must support itself, raise the bride-price for the marriages of its male members, supply the sheep and goats for necessary sacrifices. The *nyineka*, 'master (or owner) of the household', has full control of everyone and everything in it—wives and children, houses, fields, cattle, servants, and slaves if any. He parcels out the gardening patches, makes offerings to the spirits, decides when an animal is to be butchered and how it is to be shared out, both within the household and to friends and kinsmen. He makes marriage arrangements for both the sons and the daughters, and must be treated by all with respect and obedience.

Within the household, however, individuals have many customary separate rights. Each wife, and each son's wife, has her own hut, and every hut is a separate unit of domestic economy.

Each wife tills her own fields, stores her own crops, feeds her own children, and cooks separately for her husband. A wife has no responsibility whatsoever for the children of her co-wives, and there are even differential property rights among the various houses (see below, pp. 35, 96). Grown sons and their wives maintain their own daily routines quite apart from those of the main household, though they must do certain defined chores and bring specified gifts from time to time. Even quite young children may work their own fields or own some separate property (see below, p. 94).

This separateness which exists within the household's formal unity is an important expression of the segmentary principle upon which the larger social structure is built. Like the series of larger patrilineages of which the household is a part, it is in a state of potential fission, tending to split into component units which will have independent status. In the household, these lines of potential cleavage are the separate sub-households of the various sons, particularly those of different mothers. Even during a father's lifetime, a mature son may become a household head in his own right, with his father's permission. To build for himself without this permission would be a serious offence. No one would help him in such a defiant enterprise. But if his father does give permission, and lends his formal assistance, the son may build a compound of his own, maintain his own herds and fields, arrange his children's marriages, and so on. He will, however, still make offerings to the ancestral spirits through his father, and will carry to his father the customary first-fruit gifts that mark his formal dependence.

After the father's death, sons are expected to remain together as a unit under the authority of the eldest among them, who is the official heir. But in practice the bond is a tenuous one and, as the years pass, the sons become more independent, even to the point of building their own spirit huts. They will still be bound by many ties of mutual obligation. Some of these are largely voluntary. They will help each other in daily chores and in times of crisis, lend each other cattle for a bride-price payment (to be returned in full), go together to beer feasts and sometimes on cattle-raids. In a more formal way, a senior is responsible for the well-being of junior orphaned siblings, and should see to their marriages, as their father would have done. And brothers