

LETTERS TO AFRICA

Letters to the Editor should refer to matters raised in the journal and should be signed and give the full address and position of the writer. The Editor reserves the right to shorten letters or to decline them.

From Dr. S. R. Charsley

Dear Sir, In his paper 'The Social Structure of the Nyakyusa: a Re-evaluation', *Africa* 43 (2): 91-107; Michael G. McKenny has wrestled with the fascinating Nyakyusa ethnography presented by the Wilsons and has drawn new attention to its richness in many directions and its provoking gaps in others. His concentration is on the age-villages and the problem of their nature, but, as he notes, my study of *The Princes of Nyakyusa* discusses some of the same questions and arrives at the same general perspective on Nyakyusa society (Charsley, 1969). I am therefore in considerable agreement with most of his findings but I regret that he has not used the opportunity to carry Nyakyusa studies as far ahead as he might. He adheres closely to the Wilsons' own work and in so doing limits his own results in two particular ways.

His study is, in the first place, as fundamentally timeless as most of the Wilsons' own. He shows no awareness that both the society and its members' perception of it are likely to have changed radically in the forty or so years of European overrule preceding the basic anthropological work. I have argued that such changes had indeed occurred, as an essentially acephalous type of social order was transformed into an administered one. Nyakyusa society in the late nineteenth century has to be regarded as acephalous in form since the princes and their followings did not represent the independent political units, the 'chiefdoms', which they were by the 1930s taken to have been. McKenny cites many of the factors supporting this view, but not the most significant fact that there was at the period a complex hierarchy of princely titles, rather than merely a series of structurally equivalent, independent 'chiefs'. Such a hierarchy existed because princely positions did not at that period disappear as the result of a subsequent Coming Out, nor necessarily with the death of their incumbents. These latter might be replaced through a normal process of succession, and their names remained as 'titles' to which were attached varying degrees of superiority, ritual, kinship, and political, over positions and titles created at later Comings Out. The ceremony itself seems therefore not to have involved the two young princes succeeding to an existing position of authority, as was the Wilsons' basic view, but to have concerned the creation of new positions and the attachment to them of followings. The hierarchy of princely titles produced, each with its own following, was manned by incumbents whose varying authority, power, and wealth were, I have

argued, determined in the course of a continuing competitive process, on which ultimately depended the survival of the titles themselves.

The social principles operating in this type of society were inevitably different in many respects from those in the society into which it had been transformed by the 1930s. In the beginning German missions and Administration infiltrated the acephalous order and subtly changed the status of princes, and subsequently, after a pause in the first ten years of British control, a series of more positive reforms began under the policy of Indirect Rule. Administrative hierarchies, with two Paramounts, Sub-chiefs, and Headmen, all salaried and with graded powers and responsibilities, were established. Such administrative hierarchies were very unlike the pre-colonial pattern of titles linked by ties of perpetual kinship, maintained by incumbents who were often in relationships of direct kinship and competition with one another. The obviously new situation produced by these reforms tended, I believe, to obscure the fundamental changes which had already occurred much earlier under the Germans, and in particular led to a stressing of the previous independence of ruling princes, at the expense of any appreciation of previous elements of hierarchy in their relationships. The reforms caused considerable difficulty and disputation, assertions of princely equality and rivalry, and concern that the 'traditional' partnership between commoners and princes had been upset. Further changes were made piecemeal, and in 1935, when the Wilsons were already at work, the Paramountcy was finally abandoned and a new system with a 'Federation' of equal chiefs and headmen replaced the more hierarchical arrangement (Charsley, 1965: 205-14).

Such historical events and processes cannot be ignored in evaluating the 1930s evidence, and while it is true that many of the factors of change would have affected the princeliness much more than the age-villages, the principle remains the same. It is clear that the villages were important units in nineteenth-century society, in processes of social control, dispute-settlement and defence, and an appreciation of the differences in the significance of village membership in acephalous and in administered conditions must be basic for any re-evaluation of them. One must at least be clear as to the period one is analysing and how the evidence available relates to it.

The second limitation of McKenny's study is its failure to move beyond the Wilsons' own material. Granted that this is and must remain the basis for any study of the Nyakyusa past, the extent of the

other sources available is now plain and it is regrettable that they and the analyses which have already been made on the basis of them were not used. Something of the range and quality of the documentation available became apparent to me when I was working on my own re-evaluation in 1964, and it has since been more fully revealed by Marcia Wright's work on the operation of the missions in the area and much else of social consequence besides (Wright, 1971). The German missionaries in their first period of work among the Nyakyusa from 1891 until the First World War were particularly valuable observers and prolific reporters. Much of this is published material. On the basis of it, I believe it is possible to go some way beyond the conjectures offered by McKenny, at least on some aspects.

He claims, for instance, that 'there is no concrete evidence of how chiefdom division actually worked even within the ideal scheme of things' (104), and it is of course true that there are not and can never be detailed case histories of the creation of titles in the nineteenth century and their subsequent careers. Nevertheless, a good deal of evidence of particular relationships and rivalries, and of outcomes, does appear in the missionaries' reports and in the princely genealogies which have been published. This evidence does assemble into a useful and coherent picture of political processes as they actually occurred at that period. McKenny writes also that 'it is not inconceivable that chiefdom division was relatively orderly at least where land was not too scarce' (104), but there is in fact evidence on the 'orderliness' of division in various circumstances, obtainable through a comparison of different princely lines in different parts of the country, together with a sense of the demography and history as the records reveal these. I did in fact discuss these two particular matters in my book. This is not to say that they have been adequately dealt with, but they have been considered and the general point is that, by returning too exclusively to the Wilsons' material, McKenny has, as I believe, largely missed the opportunity to move Nyakyusa studies on from the point they had already reached.

Yours faithfully

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From Professor Michael McKenny

Dear Sir, I substantially agree with some of Dr. Charsley's points. But he does not recognize that the purpose of my article was not so much to expand

our knowledge of the Nyakyusa social order through reference to new material as to call attention to the sociological processes which such an order must have contained.

I am in full agreement with Charsley's perception of the significance of linked chiefly titles; there is much evidence on this phenomenon from elsewhere in East Africa. But there is much which still remains to be decided relative to the nature of Nyakyusa chieftainship and the political relations of chiefdoms. It would be most worth while to examine and compare the nature of authority in chiefdoms which can be seen to have varied in terms of ecological and politico-economic situation. It seems, given the information presented by Fotheringham (1891), that the chiefdoms of the northern shore of Lake Malawi were larger in scale than the upland chiefdoms, or at least were able to co-ordinate their efforts on a fairly massive scale; they were able to muster quite large forces against the slavers operating along the Lake. Godfrey Wilson's examination (1939) of the growth of the Ngonde chieftainship from a ritual office similar to that of the Lwembe of Nyakyusa into a political chieftainship based on control of trade items is of great interest in this respect. A lakeside chiefdom may have been in a more open economic situation, and also more exposed to the threat of military aggression than the chiefdoms of the uplands, and may have expanded and centralized accordingly; the situation is perhaps comparable to the history of chiefdom formation on the north shore of Lake Victoria.

In my article I stated that chiefdoms were likely to have been quite different from one another; chiefdoms verged from the acephalous, with the 'chief' being essentially a priest, to more complex situations with the chief occupying a more pivotal position. The religious values of chieftainship seem to have been a constant factor, whereas true political authority was quite variable. The question which still remains to be answered, which neither the Wilsons, Charsley, nor myself have been adequately able to do, is that of how followings came to be attached to titles and how out of such situations chieftainships could attain the status of a political office with powers to act independently. The title itself was a symbol and perhaps virtually a metaphor for political association; wherever *de facto* political association occurred, I suspect that a 'prince' would have been found to serve as its figurehead. If it is possible to decide how areas became settled and economically and politically distinct, we have gone most of the way to deciding how chieftainship expanded. It is also possible to postulate a process similar to that of the expansion of the Alur chieftainship into an acephalous hinterland (Southall, 1956), the local mythology making the chiefs appear as the descendants of foreign civilizing heroes may give some credence to this. On the whole it is also highly probable that the political processes were generally those of essentially

acephalous societies. I fully recognize, *contra* Charsley, that the twentieth-century Nyakyusa image of chieftainship is quite unlikely to match the nineteenth-century facts. And it is true that such images, at whatever time, are largely ideological. Charsley states that there was a 'complex hierarchy of princely titles rather than merely a series of structurally equivalent, independent "chiefs".' I would further suggest that this hierarchy was quite flexible. It was probably the case that, though there existed a genealogically based putative hierarchy, the position of a given chief in it was a product of his political situation, and that the well-known process of structural amnesia led to the floating of titles depending on contingent political relations, e.g. on the need of specific chiefs and of entire local political units for ideological validation. Chieftainship is the totemism of the Nyakyusa; it provided an ideological focus provided in other societies by lineage ideology.

In my article I wished to call attention to the influence of such variable factors as these. My specific purpose was to examine the Wilsons' account of the 'age-village' organization, and in doing this it became necessary partially to devalue the political significance of chieftainship through reference to the possibility of economic, demographic, and political factors which are precisely those typical of acephalous societies. I am therefore puzzled as to the reference to 'missed opportunities' at the end of Dr. Charsley's note; I was trying to point out what opportunities *should* be grasped; they were not grasped, neither by the Wilsons nor fully by Charsley, and that is the issue. Unfortunately much of this sort of work must be done on the basis of comparative and historical evidence. Even missionary records, however, may not be too useful

in this since missionaries, like the Nyakyusa themselves *c.* 1935 would have seen Nyakyusa chieftainship as a focal centralized office; but much of the conflict and political turbulence seen by them as being between chiefs would actually have been conflict between largely acephalous geo-political groups focused ideologically on chieftainship. And there is no reason to suppose that allegiance was in any way a constant as to who was attached to what title and for what purpose; similarly there is no reason to suppose any precision in the delimitation of political boundaries and concomitant patterns of social relations. It would in general be necessary to examine the detailed eco-geography of the region in question and to compare the findings of this examination with what is actually known about the locations and historical interrelations of chiefdoms. Given an adequate perception of the fundamental economic basis of Nyakyusa society many of the problems presented by the Nyakyusa literature would be on the way to solution.

Yours faithfully

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