

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir:

I have read with interest Mr. Lloyd Binagi's useful letter (*Africa* 49(4)) concerning the relationship between Kuria, Suba, and other groups in the borderland between Tanzania and Kenya near the shores of Lake Victoria. His linguistic points are well-taken, and I will return to this question after making a few supplementary comments of my own.

Since the appearance of my paper on northern Suba oral history in 1977 (*Africa* 43(3)), I have undertaken further oral historical research among the Suba groups of the mainland immediately south of Winam (Kavirondo) Gulf, particularly those of Kaksingiri Location. Mr. Binagi quite rightly calls attention to the fact that the primary historical affiliation of these groups is not to the northern Lake; but where these affinities actually lie is a complex matter, partly because of the linguistic questions to which he calls attention. Unlike the northern shore where it is absent, circumcision is or was widespread among the Bantu-speaking groups of the eastern Lake region. And, so far as local historical memory and other circumstantial evidence are concerned, the primary affinities of the mainland northern Suba are with other coastal groups to their south and with the Gusii to the east; though Binagi appears to see a more intimate connection, little explicit mention is made of the Kuria in oral histories beyond broad and stereotyped assertions of historical relatedness based on common Bantu speech. The relationship of the Suba to the Luhyia appears to be, as Binagi says, rather remote, but I think that it was not absent, especially in Kaksingiri.

There are many historical complexities which linguistic research would go some way to clearing up. In the first instance, the various 'Suba' groups are geographically and, in some cases (perhaps all), dialectically separate communities: there are the northern islanders of Rusinga and Mfangano (the main subject of my 1977 paper); the northern mainlanders of Gembe, Kaksingiri, and Gwassii Locations; the southern mainlanders of the Tanzanian coast, about whom very little has been published; and, finally, inland groups in Kenya bordering the Kuria and Gusii, about whom even less is known. The very name 'Suba' itself remains a puzzle.

I am certain that Mfangano and Rusinga Islands were mainly settled from the north, though the area of Imbo Location on the adjoining eastern mainland has surely had an influence as well (cf. Ayot, 1973; Ochieng', 1975; Kenny, forthcoming).¹ Also, the dominant lineages of Gwassii claim, as I pointed out in 1977 and as Ogot (1967) had pointed out before, that their ancestor was a Ganda migrant, the assassin of the Kabaka Junju, who had first stopped on Mfangano. But all other evidence from Gwassii (circumcision, etc.) points elsewhere. The story of the Ganda migrant has mysterious qualities, and is perhaps some kind of syncretism. The majority of lineages in Kaksingiri claim origins in an area called 'Rienyi' in the vicinity of Mori Bay on the coast in Tanzania, an area in a position to have also had an influence on the Kuria or vice versa.² But there is also evidence for movement into Kaksingiri from north of the Gulf and, the Rienyi story notwithstanding, the dominant pattern of movement as it is imaged in oral history is north to south,³ a fact which may have some bearing on the

linguistic similarities which Mr. Binagi perceives between the Suba and Kuria. In general it can be presumed that all the Bantu-speaking peoples of the region are, in origin, heterogeneous agglomerates.

I have concluded (Kenny, *op cit*), on the basis of new research, there there was much movement along the relatively drought-ridden coast brought about by local famine and persistent trading contacts; what little evidence there is also points to movement of uncertain magnitude and frequency into the Kisii Highlands in response to the same factors (which also affected the Luo). Given this, and the great complexity of oral tradition, Mr. Binagi's comments assume great importance. Historical linguistic research is badly needed among the Bantu-speaking groups of the eastern Lake region, and would be welcomed by all those interested in local history.

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NOTES

¹ A Bantu language was still spoken on Rusinga Island at the turn of the century, though it is now extinct; Hobley published (1902) a fairly extensive wordlist which could be of some use in establishing its affiliations; there are at least some cognates with Luganda.

² An early German source (Weiss, 1910:241) points out that the Kuria were originally miscalled 'Basuba' by the Europeans.

³ See Kenny (1978).

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