

The outstanding feature which links and contrasts the two stories is, of course, the concentration on the climatic phenomenon of 'the dry years'. The patriarch Joseph relies implicitly on God and is therefore given power to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, and knowledge to prepare for the dry years, thus to save both the Egyptians and his own people. Joseph Wayne has what amounts to a God-complex, and he ignores the historically established phenomenon of 'dry years', about which he is warned very early by Romas the driver (13). Joseph Wayne turns into his own obsessive world. When even his brother Thomas, puzzled by his 'offerings' to the tree, which for Joseph now represents his father, asks: '“Is it about the dry years, Joseph? Are you working already against them?”' (33), recalling the Genesis story, Joseph is blinded by his own obsessions. In a like manner, Joseph Wayne falls away in general from the great role of his biblical predecessor, and instead of saving the people, by way of land and livestock, he allows both people and cattle to be driven helplessly away, and remains 'mystically' united to the land.

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(In the next issue the authors continue the discussion with reference to *East of Eden*.)

Monica Wilson: Remembrance of Roots, Awareness of Persons

by Adrian Edwards, C.S.Sp.

Whether or not beauty is in the eye of the beholder, history surely is. 'We do not', said A. J. P. Taylor somewhere, 'understand the present by the past, but the past by the present.' For an historian this is courageous, for an anthropologist it would be trite. Even at undergraduate level, social anthropology teaches one to see how often the appeal to history is just the excuse for, or the indictment of, the present; what Chesterton, I think, called 'the democracy of the dead', the influence of an acknowledged tradition on decisions, may prove to be the most rigged of ballots. Perhaps this way of seeing things is partially a result of the pre-selection of anthropologists; certainly a remarkably high proportion of us do seem to have undergone some sharp uprooting, whether of country, or faith, or family ties, between infancy and early maturity, and hence are especially sympathetic to rejections, or reshapings of the past, on the

part of others. Clearly enough, there are continuities in our lives and our societies which, even though they need reshaping, also need to be honestly interpreted; and I think that what Professor Monica Wilson has given us in *Religion and the Transformation of Society*¹ is such an honest interpretation of southern African society as a whole, and, more closely, of Nyakyusa society in particular, and also, impressively though unintentionally, of Monica Wilson's own understanding of life. It seeks, to be sure, to interpret societies which, more than most, experience the torment of unrealized change; yet the impression of the author's personality which remains after reading, as that of one whose very fulfilment has been through the conscious seeking of continuities and the willing acceptance of change, is stronger than that given by many garrulous autobiographies. Perhaps, therefore, it may be legitimate to sketch out her life and work a little more fully than this book does.

Monica Hunter was born in the Eastern Cape, the daughter of a Presbyterian missionary to the Nguni people. Her first book *Reaction to Conquest*² describes the culture of the Pondo, one of the Nguni groups, and includes some vividly glimpsed African comments on their masters. It was, however, after her marriage to Godfrey Wilson that she began, with him, the field-work among the Nyakyusa in the south-west of what was then Tanganyika, which was to result in a remarkable trilogy, *Good Company*³ (1951), *Rituals of Kinship Among the Nyakyusa*⁴ (1957) and *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (1959),⁵ all the more remarkable as being the work of a widowed mother, actively involved in university teaching, and even in some further research. Before Godfrey Wilson's death in the war, they had been working on a more theoretical book, *The Analysis of Social Change*⁶ (1945).

Reading *Religion and the Transformation of Society*, one recalls easily enough much of the Nyakyusa trilogy. Here again are the offerings in the banana groves, where the living praised, and expostulated with, the hungry forebears before feasting with them; the fear of the corrosive effect of unexpressed anger among kinsmen; the pagan priest, Kasitile, attracted to Christianity, and not unwilling to accept monogamy, yet feeling that his duties to perform the rituals which related to the fertility of the earth obliged him to reject baptism.⁷ But perhaps I should outline more clearly Nyakyusa society.⁸

¹*A Study in Social Change in Africa* by Monica Wilson. Cambridge University Press, 1971, pp. 165. £1.80 in U.K.

²Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, 1936.

³O.U.P. for I.A.I.—reprinted as a Beacon Paperback, Beston, U.S.A.

⁴O.U.P. for I.A.I.

⁵O.U.P. for I.A.I.

⁶Cambridge University Press.

⁷*Religion and the Transformation of Society*, p. 93.

⁸Apart from sources quoted, there is a good general account by Godfrey Wilson reprinted in *Seven Tribes of British Central Africa* (ed. M. Gluckman and E. Celson), O.U.P., 1951.

Like other African peoples, the Nyakyusa combined extended kin groups with units based on age, even though the particular form which these took—the age-villages, which obliged a man to settle with his contemporaries and apart from his father—was atypical, as was, for that matter, the form of the chieftaincy where the same stress on the distinctiveness of the generations would oblige a chief, while still alive, to share power with two of his sons. Wealth took the form of cattle, though the Nyakyusa were far from being exclusively pastoralists; and cattle being the medium through which wives were obtained, their concentration in the hands of the elder men favoured polygyny, and gave them control over their sons' marriages.

There existed cults of the family ancestors and also of the spirits of dead heroes, whose influence affected a geographical area rather than a group of kinsmen, and was associated with the chiefly lines. Yet even the chiefs were not immune from the main mystical sanction, 'the breath of men', what we should call outraged public opinion, believed by the Nyakyusa to have the power of causing illness, even death, to those who practised selfishness and neglected the norms of good neighbourliness.

When the Wilsons were in Nyakyusa country in the thirties, Lutheran and Moravian missionaries had been at work for over forty years, and there had emerged something of what might be called a distinctively Nyakyusa way of interpreting Christian ethics. 'In pagan thought moral obligations are limited to kinsmen and neighbours:—Christians have read the parable of the Good Samaritan and taken it to heart—"If a Kinga comes and asks for a place to sleep the night and you refuse you are among the goats". "If a traveller from the coast asks for a place to sleep and you refuse, do you show love?" "We tell a bride she should be hospitable to her neighbours if she can, but she *must* cook for those from a distance"—Linked with the concern for strangers is the obligation to preach the Gospel to others—such tours implied hardship in travelling and a leap in sympathy.¹

More striking still has been the change in the concept of holiness. Formerly, ritual was directed at freeing men from the brooding closeness of the spirits, but for at least the more thoughtful Nyakyusa Christians closeness to God, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, are desired and welcomed: 'If a pagan dreams of converse (ukwangala) with shades, he fears death; if a Christian dreams of converse with God he rejoices greatly because it means he is gaining strength in Christianity.'²

Anybody who has read carefully through the trilogy will find at the end that he has not merely acquired a great deal of information but also that he has had an experience which is too rarely given by fiction writers, let alone scholars; a real, albeit transitory, empathy

¹*Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa*, pp. 201-2. The Kinga are a nearby tribe.

²*Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa*, p. 202.

with a way of life and a code of values entirely different from his own. It is not the least of the merits of *Religion and the Transformation of Society* that not only has Professor Wilson ably summarized the information given, and conclusions established, in the trilogy, but she can also give something of what was surely the feel of Nyakyusa society; the closeness, physical and social, of people to each other, a closeness which needed limiting and shaping by very formal rules of etiquette; the predominant concern with fertility, a concern which bred a fear that unless ritual precautions were carefully kept, fertility would turn sour and bring a curse rather than a blessing; and the emphasis on etiquette and seniority, an emphasis which was intended to save society from the volcanic consequences of anger and envy. This awareness, which Monica Wilson gives us, of the very limited resources of which the Nyakyusa built their world, should arouse our admiration whether we think the delicately balanced patterns of this society are ultimately a metaphysical escape of the technologically powerless, or whether we see in it a wisdom of social man that our concern with being producers and consumers has stifled.

But the very skill with which Professor Wilson interprets Nyakyusa values indicates that she is more than 'a camera with the shutter open'. I have heard it argued that social anthropology is essentially an immoral profession; that the anthropologist wins the confidence and friendship of the people he or she studies simply to acquire information for his or her ends. This book provides surely a sufficient reply to the charge, for while there is very little personal detail, still less chit-chat in it, it could only have been written by someone whose growth to maturity and outgoing sympathy had been achieved, at least to a very considerable degree, through and in the experience of living simultaneously in different cultures, a situation in which one has to give a good deal in order to receive at all.

This experience, of habitually living in two worlds, has had its influence on Monica Wilson's understanding of Christianity. She would definitely range herself with those who see Christian faith as future-oriented,¹ and she is clear that southern Africa requires a revolutionary—though non-violent—form of Christian witness. Yet she has a great deal of time for continuities, whether in the England to which she came as a young 'barbarian from South Africa', or in the African societies to which she apprenticed herself. From African values she draws four ideas from which modern Westerners have much to learn: the community of the living and the dead, the reality of evil among human beings, the bridling of individualism, and a concern for ultimate reality expressed in ritual terms rather than for technical answers sought empirically.² On balance, however, she feels that the passing of the small-scale society is not to be regretted,

¹*Religion and the Transformation of Society* p. 146 onwards.

²*Op. cit.*, p. 137-42.

since the widening of social scale increases choice, and hence the capacity for self-awareness. 'Of course the choices may not be comfortable, for the God who returns to the centre is the suffering servant and no magician. But wrestling with the choices is part of loving God with our minds.'¹

I have tried to suggest that the real value of this book is that it is a most unusual kind of autobiography, a personality revealed to us through sharing her understanding of the societies in which she has been a stranger and at home. It is an indirect self-revelation; and, because of this, avoids both the smart externality of the travel book, and the necessary objectifying of abstract sociological theory. It would not then be right to treat it exclusively as a book intended to push forward the frontiers of anthropological theory; nevertheless, it has sufficient theoretical merits to be considered from this point of view.

A lot of social scientists nourish a secret hope of writing a definitive, if not the definitive, book on social change. In fact, what emerges is usually some rehash of cyclical theory, or a book which, like Robert Redfield's *The Folk Culture of Yucatan*,² uses rather general language which, in fact, turns out to apply to one particular part of the world. Frankly, as a work of comparative sociology, *Religion and the Transformation of Society* belongs to this second category as did *The Analysis of Social Change*, which also stressed the significance of scale. The new element in the present book is the emphasis on the growth in self-awareness; but this is asserted, rather than proved. 'The measure of self-consciousness in a Nyakyusa ritual seems to me much less than in Shakespeare's plays, the novels of Tolstoy, or the Italian painters of the Renaissance'.³ Such a remark immediately raises questions as to the degree to which European high art provides a common language for the majority of Europeans, and opportunities for some kind of active participation for those who do appreciate it. An earlier remark of Professor Wilson's, 'in Africa, long before Freud analysed the dreams of his Viennese patients, it was understood that dreams were an expression of conflict; before Erikson spoke of loss of identity, African villagers spoke of those with majesty, authority, casting a shadow—and those torn within casting no shadow',⁴ at least suggests a considerable degree of self-awareness on the individual and collective planes that will not surprise those with first-hand knowledge of African countrymen.

Any satisfactory theory of social change, even one applicable only to one society, would have to take into account other factors than social consciousness of scale. The precise relation between the

¹*Op. cit.*, p. 150.

²University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1941. This book places four Yucatan communities along a scale characterized by increasing complexity, and so on. Mainly worth reading for the account of Catholic-pagan syncretism.

³*Religion and the Transformation of Society* p. 131.

⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 75.