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. Monica Wilson, Helen Cam Research Fellow, Girton College, Cambridge

Sir, Within recent years three writers, Marcia Wright, S. R. Charsley, and Michael G. McKenny have discussed what they think Nyakyusa society was like before the colonial period. Two of them, Marcia Wright and S. R. Charsley, working on mission correspondence and journals, have provided invaluable material on the interaction between missions, administration, and Nyakyusa from 1887, but they have also speculated on what Nyakyusa society was like before the records they use began, and the distinction between record and speculation is blurred. Moreover, the information given on what Nyakyusa society was like at the end of last century, as distinct from the account of interaction between certain Nyakyusa individuals and certain missionaries, is exceedingly thin. The scraps of information can only be fitted into some imagined framework. Michael McKenny questions and reinterprets the evidence published by Godfrey Wilson and myself, but he does not provide any new evidence. I believe that the speculations and reinterpretations are mistaken on a number of points and therefore, with reluctance, accept an invitation to discuss them.

In *German Missions in Tanzania* (1971) Dr. Wright has published a body of detailed evidence on early missions in the Rungwe valley, and Nyakyusa attitudes to them, most of it precisely documented in mission records. But she makes one statement for which no evidence is offered and which is demonstrably false. Commenting on my statement that 'the Nyakyusa have been expanding for three centuries and absorbing smaller peoples' (M. Wilson, 1958: 9, n. 4) she writes: 'Unfortunately, such a theory of absorption badly errs in assuming that the pattern of outward colonization from Rungwe so evident in the 1930s had prevailed for centuries rather than for decades, as appears to have been the case.' In *Good Company* (M. Wilson, 1951: 3) it was noted that the settlement of Nyakyusa north of the Poroto mountains was 'recent', and the spread through the Rungwe valley and lake plain was shown on a map of Nyakyusa chiefdoms related to the royal genealogies in *Communal Rituals* (M. Wilson, 1959*a*: genealogies facing pp. 3, 27; map p. 87, 87–93). The spread was recounted in detailed oral histories of local areas which have not been published, but the general statement was rooted in this evidence. The land-marks—sacred groves—were still visible in 1955.

Dr. Wright went on to argue in 'Nyakyusa Cults and Politics in the later Nineteenth Century' (Wright, 1972: 157) that the Lwembe had not been preeminent as divine king of the Nyakyusa before 1891: 'The spiritual authority of the Lwembes which in fact *probably* existed to a limited extent before the 1890s, is assumed for a much earlier period' (my italics). She quoted the Berlin missionaries who described the challenge to the Lwembe of one claiming to be a priest of Mbasi in 1893 and concludes: 'it was from this victory, *so it seems*, that the wide influence of Lwembe dated' (Wright, 1972: 158, my italics). In fact she has no evidence on what existed at Lubaga before 1891, whereas the accounts given in *Communal Rituals* (1959*a*) and *Divine Kings* (M. Wilson, 1959*b*) came from men who were already holding office as priests and chiefs in 1891. Moreover, if the power of the Lwembe was indeed limited before 1891, how did it come about that in 1897 the chiefs who combined against the Germans gathered at Lubaga, the grove of the Lwembe? And if the priest of Mbasi had been of comparable importance why was his grove not mentioned in Kinga accounts—the Kinga priests passed nearby on the road to Lwembe? (Park, 1966: M. Wilson, 1959*a*: 27). The oral tradition regarding Lubaga stretched back seven generations to the spread of chiefs into the area; the shrine of Mbasi had no such tradition. The 'probably' and 'so it seems' of Dr. Wright's argument do not serve in place of evidence. Dr. Wright is also sceptical of the statement that the Lwembe, like the Kyungu and Kyala, might be appealed to by unrelated chiefs (M. Wilson, 1959*a*: 18) and talks of how it was 'a dictum of the Wilsons' work that rituals ran along the lines of kinship' (Wright, 1972: 157). She overlooks the principle that a chief was thought of as having mystical power *both* over his own junior kinsmen and over the land, stock, and people in the country he ruled or had once ruled. The living Lwembe claimed mystical power over a wide and never precisely defined area: Godfrey Wilson noted in his *Introduction to Nyakyusa Society* (1936: 288) that Mwamba, who claimed no kinship with the Lwembe, sent to Lubaga, whereas offerings were made at the groves of ordinary chiefs (such as Mbyanga) only by their descendants, and commoner priests representing the chiefdoms they had once ruled.

Dr. Charsley thinks that Nyakyusa chiefs were a creation of the colonial period and that before Europeans arrived the Nyakyusa were 'acephalous'. This was offered as a tentative hypothesis in 1969 (*The Princes of Nyakyusa*) but was stated as assured fact in 1974 (*Africa*, xliv (4): 422), though no more evidence was given. He wrote (1974) 'Nyakyusa society in the late nineteenth century has to be

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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.' Dr. Charsley further argued that in place of chiefdoms there was 'a complex hierarchy of princely titles' to which men succeeded under a system of 'positional succession'.

There is no doubt that some Nyakyusa chiefs increased in power during the colonial period, as Godfrey Wilson showed. But an increase in power under colonial rule has also been shown for Bemba, Sotho, Tswana, and other chiefs: it did not imply the absence of chieftainship before colonial rule began. And four characteristics of Nyakyusa chieftainship which are cited by Charsley (1969: 69–73) as evidence that Nyakyusa *abanyfyale* were *not* chiefs, were characteristic of chieftainship through southern Africa. These were: control of a chief by his councillors; continual splitting of chiefdoms; rivalry between chiefs to attract men; and a connection between a chief's generosity and the size of his following. It can hardly be argued that the Swazi king, the Rolong and Kgatla chiefs, who could be tried by their own councillors (Kuper, 1947: 63–4; Schapera, 1938: 84) were not chiefs. Tswana chiefdoms split 63 times in less than 200 years (Schapera, 1963: 163–5); and rivalry for men was apparent in every Nguni and Sotho chiefdom until land grew scarce. Casalis, writing in 1835, related the number of followers a chief had to the quantity of milk he distributed (Germond, 1967: 437).

As for size, Charsley quoted Merensky as saying that Mwamakula of the lake plain could raise an army of 6,000 men, whereas in 1843 Livingstone recorded from personal observation that no tribe in what is now Botswana had more than about 3,000 *members* (Schapera, 1963: 159), and Xhosa chiefdoms in the nineteenth century mustered between 150 and 6,000 fighting men (Wilson and Thompson, i: 119).

Before 1891 there was no authority capable of maintaining order between chiefdoms in the Rungwe valley, though the belief that misfortune followed the neglect of rituals compelled independent chiefs to make offerings together at Lubaga and other sacred groves. In *Princes of Nyakyusa* Charsley shows conflicts between members of different chiefdoms, and how German missionaries intervened in these: with one doubtful exception, he does not show unsettled conflicts within chiefdoms. According to our informants who had held office as chiefs and village headmen before 1891, or who had been litigants in cases, chief's courts existed which settled disputes and enforced judgement; the chief controlled the poison ordeal, administered in cases where evidence was lacking, and his person and the house of his senior wife were sanctuary. But the rule of law did not extend to another chiefdom, and a murderer or adulterer who fled to a distance might go free.

Charsley stated (1974) that among the Nyakyusa before 1891 there was a 'system of titles' to which 'princes' succeeded, and no independent chiefdoms. Again a tentative hypothesis of 1969 became a statement of fact in 1974 without any further evidence being adduced. In a confusing account of 'princes' of the plain and Selya (1969) Charsley attempted to relate those mentioned in the records to royal genealogies (M. Wilson, 1959*b*) and to identify 'titles'. His account is confusing because his evidence is so thin; no distinction is made in it between chiefs who had 'come out' and held power, and other members of a royal lineage. Moreover, since a Nyakyusa woman took her name from her father and her son took her name, and chiefs frequently married daughters of other chiefs, the same name repeatedly reappears in different chiefdoms. There was a further complication: in 1934–8 and almost certainly a generation earlier, a man might be addressed by different names even in the same conversation. All this leaves great uncertainty in the identifications made. Charsley was far from demonstrating that a 'system of titles' existed in place of a series of chiefdoms, each rooted in a known territory, with a chief whose heirs were known.

In 1934–8 Nyakyusa informants made a clear distinction between divine kings (Lwembe and Kyungu) and priests, each of whom when he died was replaced by one heir who took his name and social personality (M. Wilson, 1959*a*: 17–19, 93–4) and ruling chiefs who, if they lived until the 'coming out' of their sons, were usually succeeded by two heirs designated from the time of the retiring chief's marriage to two senior wives a generation earlier. The heirs represented their own generation: they were not identified with their retiring father who was expected to 'die soon'. Only if a chief died young, before the 'coming out' of his sons, was he replaced by his younger full-brother or other kinsman as chief, as Mwaipopo II replaced Mwaipopo I in Selya before 1891. When a chief died after the 'coming out' of his heirs his personal property was taken by a junior brother as personal heir, but such a man had no claim to chiefly office. The succession by sons at their 'coming out', as distinct from replacement by an heir identified with the deceased, was demonstrated in many genealogies stretching back in time, and was a consistent pattern, though the *number* of sons who succeeded could diverge from the customary two.

Professor McKenny presents no new evidence but questions that published. He does not think that age-villages could really have existed—they must have had a kinship base of some sort which is not revealed, for no census of all the villages of one or more chiefdoms was taken. He thinks it improbable that a redistribution of land was ever made without regard to kinship: 'Certainly it is unlikely that currently productive agricultural land would have been reallocated without reference to the kinship connections of the persons involved' (1973: 104). What view one takes depends whether one thinks that speculations made by an outsider in 1974 carry most weight, or the precise statements of insiders—

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Nyakyusa—made in 1934–5. I also found it surprising that cultivated land should be reallocated without reference to kinship, but I was assured by those who had participated in 'coming out' rituals that it had been, and transferred when the standing crop was reaped. Professor McKenny reports that Dr. Konter, a most careful observer in 1965–9, also doubted that old men had ever 'moved aside', but Dr. Konter worked in two villages established after 'coming out' rituals had ceased in the chiefdoms concerned, and no fathers in these villages had moved. Furthermore, fathers and sons are now in acute competition for land and no father wants to admit that, according to traditional law, he might have had to move to make way for a younger generation.

I saw age-villages with my own eyes: in 1955 in Lupata I saw the differences of generation between the old men of Bujege, the mature men of Igembe and Lugombo, and the young married men, recently 'come out' of Lupando. I traced on the ground the areas where men of Bujege, Igembe, and Lugombo had moved to make way for the young men of Lupando (M. Wilson, 1959*a*: table opposite p. 91). I listened to the laughter of Nyakyusa men when I told them that Englishmen were sceptical of the existence of age-villages and argued that there *must* be a kinship base. The men explained yet again that: 'We Nyakyusa like to live in a village with men of the same age. If we move we don't choose a village on account of kinship, but join our contemporaries who are our friends.' In 1969, working with the Rungwe team of Leiden University, it became clear to me that a distinction should be made between the boys' villages built on land provided by their fathers, and remaining there (so long as a 'coming out' ritual was celebrated) only until the 'coming out', and legally established villages of men who owned their own land, allocated at a 'coming out'. The distinction grew in importance since boys continued to build apart in 1965–9 but ceased to secure land of their own: a son remained dependent upon his own father for land. I suggested 'age-quarter' for the boys' settlement, and 'age-village' for the traditional landholding group of men, and that was acceptable in Leiden. Age-villages had ceased to exist by 1965–9 but 'age-quarters' continued. The excellent material collected by the team from Leiden shows the form of society existing in 1965–9 when land had become a scarce commodity, whereas up to 1938 men were still scarcer than land, and even in 1955, when land was becoming scarce, Professor Gulliver noted that a village headman was reluctant *not* to welcome a stranger (Gulliver, 1958: 25).

McKenny thinks that 'both the ethnographers and their informants were deluded about the frequency and nature of dual division' (1973: 105), and complains of having 'no concrete evidence of how chiefdom division actually worked'. He asks, in relation to the 'coming out', 'who would be the chief and whom would he represent and over what territory would he preside?' Answers to these questions in terms of law were explicit and have been given; if the genealogies printed opposite pp. 3 and 27 in *Communal Rituals* are compared with the map printed on p. 87, it will be seen where in the Rungwe valley the heirs of particular chiefs settled. If a chiefdom were judged too small to split one brother colonized unoccupied land where he could find it (M. Wilson 1959*a*: 89). The process by which unoccupied land was being colonized by men from Lupata in 1935–8, and taken over by Mwaipopo's junior heir in 1953, has been described (M. Wilson, 1959*a*: 89–90).

It is an elementary principle of symbolic studies that the same thing may symbolize more than one relationship or value, but McKenny has difficulty in believing that the trees of chieftainship symbolized both a chief and his great wife, and a chief and his senior village headman, and that the placing of the trees foreshadowed the future splitting of the chiefdom. He writes: . . . 'it would not necessarily have been the case that the trees had all that much to do with demarcating the division of the chiefdom' (1973: 106). Again he claims to know more than the men who planted such trees (M. Wilson, 1959*a*: 55). His doubts about the smothering of ailing chiefs —'it was supposed by Nyakyusa informants that a chief might have been killed when his powers were on the wane'—are hardly justified. One account given in *Communal Rituals* (p. 64) was that of the senior priest, Kasitile, who admitted his own participation, and Mwandisi, an old blind chief on the lake plain was equally explicit (ibid. 65). Thanks to Charsley's assiduous work there is independent evidence supporting these statements: in 1924 Dr. John Brown of Itete mission hospital wrote an account of the death of chief Mwangomo who had been his patient in hospital but was taken home (Charsley, 1969: 89–90).

Dr. Charsley finds 'most' of the Wilsons' work 'timeless' (1974: 422). In fact *The Constitution of Ngonde* (Godfrey Wilson, 1939) was concerned with how and why a kingdom developed in Ngonde, and Godfrey Wilson noted (pp. 8–9) that: 'In studying the present constitution of Ngonde and the profound changes now taking place in it, we cannot find any point of time at which the process of change began.' The crux of change in 1934–55 was the existence of a Christian minority, living somewhat apart and rather differently from their pagan kin, the growth of migrant labour and cash crops, and the increase of population leading to pressure on land. These were dealt with in all the books because they were part of everyday life: Christian villages were described in *Good Company*; conversion, church organization, and the adaptation of manners and morals were discussed at greater length in 'An African Christian Morality' (Hunter, 1936) and *Communal Rituals*, and attention given to the emergence and constitution of Independent Churches. Diversity, which may be seen as the cross-section of social change, was thus described, but it is true that, except in the *Constitution of Ngonde*,

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the flow of time has not been the *main* focus of attention. A forthcoming book is addressed specifically to combining the flow of time with analysis of the complex relationships of generations, and of men and women.

One question may be permitted. What periods of time (if any) have the three critics spent in BuNyakyusa? Members of the Leiden team who have spent months or years in the Rungwe valley seem much less sceptical of the validity of the material collected by Godfrey Wilson and myself than these distant critics.

Yours faithfully

MONICA WILSON
Cambridge

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From M. D. McLeod, Keeper, The Ethnography Department of the British Museum

Dear Sir, As I was unable to see a proof of my letter which you published in your issue of July 1974 perhaps I may now make some of the corrections I would have made at the proof stage. (I omit grammatical or stylistic corrections.)

On p. 301. 'ɔkomtoɔ' should read 'ɔkomfoɔ' and 'Nokye' should read 'Anokye'

On p. 302. 'futuro' should be 'futura' and 'Asantehene's state sword' should be 'swords'.

As I criticized Professor Frazer for garbling Asante terms it is doubly unfortunate that I was not given the chance of making the above corrections.

Yours faithfully

M. D. MCLEOD
London

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