Nyakyusa Age-Villages
Author(s): Monica Wilson
Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 79, No. 1/2 (1949), pp. 21-25
Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2844500
Accessed: 29/08/2009 16:04

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=rai.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.*

http://www.jstor.org

NYAKYUSA AGE-VILLAGES*

By Professor Monica Wilson, M.A., Ph.D.

The Nyakyusa age-village system is a peculiar one. The local unit consists not of a group of kinsmen, as it does in most parts of the world, but of a group of age-mates with their wives and young children. It therefore has some intrinsic interest and its peculiarity raises many theoretical problems.

The Nyakyusa are a Bantu-speaking people living in the Great Rift Valley at the north end of Lake Nyasa. They are cattle owners and cultivators, with elaborate techniques of green manuring and rotation, and unlike most of their neighbours they practise fixed, not shifting cultivation. Well fed and vigorous, they have been an expanding population in a relatively empty country, and at the present time they, together with the contiguous and culturally similar Ngonde people, and small groups absorbed by them, probably number about a quarter of a million. The census returns are far from exact.

The Nyakyusa long remained isolated from the outside world, for their valley is cut off by high mountains and the stormy waters of the north end of the Lake. They were scarcely touched by the slave trade and Europeans first visited the country in 1878, though the Ngonde, whose country is more accessible, had long traded with the Arabs.

Traditionally, the Nyakyusa were divided up into a number of small independent chiefdoms, numbering anything from about 100 to 3,000 married men. They developed no centralized political authority before the coming of the Europeans. The related Ngonde, on the other hand, had a paramount chief, the Kyungu. The reason for the difference in development between these groups turns on their relations with the outside world. The people of Ngonde were sending ivory to the coast and receiving cloth and guns in exchange long before Europeans came to their country. The priest of the main sacred grove of the country controlled this trade, and through his control developed far-reaching secular power, whereas a similar priest among the Nyakyusa developed no such secular power, for they had no trade with the outside world. The Nyakyusa centre of worship, Lubaga, was much more inaccessible than Mbande, that of the Ngonde. A similar tendency towards centralization as trade with the coast developed can be traced among some of the neighbouring groups also.

The Nyakyusa are patrilineal and patrilocal. Members of agnatic lineages of a depth of three or four generations are bound together by their common interest in the cattle which circulate within and between lineages, and by the supposed mystical interdependence of kin, but the lineage is not a corporate one. Kinsmen do not live together. A village consists of a group of age-mates with their wives and young children, while the men of one lineage are scattered through the chiefdom, and may even be in different chiefdoms. Polygyny is the ideal of every pagan, and is achieved by a substantial proportion of the men over 45. In a conservative part of the country nearly a third of the adult men had more than one wife. This is made possible by a gap of ten years or more in the average marriage age of men and women. Except in some wealthy Christian families, men rarely marry before 25, and commonly not until nearer 30, while the girls are betrothed about eight, and go finally to their husbands when they reach puberty. There is an elaborate puberty-marriage ritual for girls, very similar to that of the Bemba, but no circumcision or initiation of men.

Marriage is prohibited between the descendants of a common grandfather, and much disliked between descendants of a common great-grandfather, but there are no clans, or defined exogamous groups.

The age-village starts when a number of herd-boys, about 10 or 11 years old, build together at the edge of their fathers' village. They have been practising building huts for some time, as small boys in other cultures do also, but when they reach the age of 10 or 11 they actually go to live in their huts, sleeping and spending their spare time in them, though still going to their mothers' huts for meals. A boy should not and does not eat alone, but a group of friends eat together, visiting the mother of each member of their gang in turn. This system is regarded not only as being congenial to small boys (as with us) but also as moral. For the Nyakyusa eating with age-mates is a corner stone of morality, and a boy who comes home alone often to eat is severely scolded.

---

* The material on which this paper is based was collected by my late husband, Godfrey Wilson, and myself, between 1934 and 1938. He was then a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation and I of the International African Institute.—M. W.

Moving out of the parent village to sleep is directly connected by the Nyakyusa with decency. They say that a growing boy should not be aware of the sex activities of his parents, *and therefore* he must not sleep at home, even in a separate hut, but in a different village all together. As they put it, " the night is full of lewd talk " and that is all right between equals, but not before people of another generation. Their idea of " mixed company " is not male and female, but fathers and sons.

A boys' village starts quite small, with, perhaps, not more than ten or a dozen members, but it grows as young boys from the fathers' village, or from other men's villages in the neighbourhood, become old enough to join it. When the original members are fifteen or sixteen years old the village is usually closed to any further ten-year-olds, who must then start a new village on their own. Conditions vary with the density of population in the neighbourhood and other factors, but generally the age-span within a village is not more than about five years, and a village numbers between 20 and 50 members.

The boys who thus establish a village continue to live together through life. When they marry they bring their wives to the village and, when the last of them die, the village dies. As their sons grow up they move out to build villages of their own. Daughters often move out, too, marrying men in other villages, but they may and quite often do marry an age-mate of their father and remain in the village. A village (*ikipanga*) consists of a group of male contemporaries with their dependants, not in a site, and it retains its identity no matter how often it moves.

The men of a village are all of an age and bound together by a common life shared from early youth, but the women in any village are of diverse age and experience. As we have already seen, men usually marry as their first wives girls about ten years younger than themselves, but not all the men of a village marry at the same time, and as they grow older they continue to marry young girls as junior wives. Often the junior wife is a niece—a brother's daughter—of the senior. Moreover, wives are inherited from elder brothers and fathers, so that a man may have some wives older than himself and others who are very much younger.

Once in each generation there is a great ceremony at which administrative power and military leadership are handed over by the older generation to the younger. At this ceremony there is a new deal in land. The men of the retiring generation move to one side to make room for the expanding villages of the younger generation, but it is not simply a transfer of land from one village of fathers to one of sons ; the boundaries within the chiefdom are all redrawn, and the old men move even when there is unoccupied land available for their sons. The only land excluded from the new deal are the very valuable fields made in the craters of extinct volcanoes, and these are inherited, like cattle, within lineages.

At this ceremony, which is called *ubusoka*, " the coming out," each village of young men is formally established on its own land, one of its members is appointed as headman, and its relative status in the hierarchy of villages in the chiefdom is demonstrated. At the same time the two senior sons of the retiring chief are recognized as chiefs, and the old chief's country divided between them. The division does not become absolute until the old man's death, but he was expected to die very soon after the coming out, and if he did not do so from natural causes he was probably strangled. The Nyakyusa theory is that he died from " the chilling breath " of his people who loved his sons rather than him. The fact that old chiefs do not now die off as they used to do is one of the political problems of the country ; power tends to remain in the hands of the older generation much longer than before a European administration was established.

Although chiefdoms were thus divided each generation, they did not necessarily become smaller, because the Nyakyusa were expanding, spreading out in a sparsely inhabited land, and also the conquest and absorption of one small chiefdom by another was constantly going on.

The allocation of land and the selection of a headman for each village of young men is made by the retiring chief, and the headmen of the villages of his generation, who are his advisers and against whose advice he dare not act, since they are believed to have a mystical power over him. Village headmen are always commoners. Sons of chiefs and sons of village headmen of the previous generation are not eligible, for, the Nyakyusa say, if a son of a headman were chosen each generation he would become a chief. The headmen are the leaders of the people, the *commons*, and a contrast is constantly being made between chiefs (*abanyafyale*), on the one hand, and commoners (*amafumu*) on the other. The village headmen are the *amafumu par excellence* : that is, the " great commoners."

At any one time there are three age-grades : that of the old men who are retired from administration but whose leaders have certain ritual functions to perform ; that of the ruling generation which is responsible for defence and administration ; and that of the young men and boys who have not yet " come out," but who fight when necessary under the leadership of men of their fathers' generation, though in their own age units.

Within each grade are a varying number of villages each composed of near contemporaries. The ages of the men in each grade vary, of course, with the date of the last " coming out " ceremony. Just before such a ceremony the old retired men will all be over 65, while the ruling generation includes those between about 35 and 65 ; just after such a ceremony everyone over 35 is retired, and those from about 10 to 35 are in office. The youngest members of a generation taking office have at first very little share in public life, but individuals may gain power later, through inheriting the position of an older brother.

The age grouping is somewhat modified by the system of inheritance, under which a man's heir, who is his next younger full brother or, under certain circumstances, a half-brother, or his senior son, may take over his homestead and his social personality. An heir, though he be much younger than other men of the village, is treated as one of themselves. Were all heirs to move into the homesteads of their elder brothers and fathers, villages would continue indefinitely, but in fact they do not. Very often the heir chooses to remain in his own village, a member of his own age-set. An heir must move if he succeeds to the office of village headman or priest of the chiefdom, for acceptance of such office is an obligation. It is possible also that movement by inheritance is more common from the junior villages of an age-grade to senior villages of the same grade, than to villages of another grade, but of this I am not certain. Our information on the conditions determining the heir's choice to move or not move is inadequate.

In theory only villages of three generations survive, and we found on analysing all the villages of the chiefdom we knew best that this was very nearly true in practise. Only one village of the great-grandfathers' generation survived, and it had only eleven members.

The village, then, is the land-holding group, its members dividing among themselves the land allocated to their village at the " coming out." The homesteads, each surrounded with bananas, are built compactly in a group, while the main fields are all together on the fringes of the village. Beyond the fields lies the common pasture land. Families each work their own fields and control their own produce, but in cultivating certain crops they must keep in step with their neighbours. Failure to do so is thought to reduce the yield for everyone. Neighbours' cattle are herded together—to herd one's cattle alone is a proud and boastful thing to do—and in any major undertaking such as housebuilding, both neighbours and relatives from other villages co-operate. Traditionally, fellow villagers had certain responsibilities for each other's *torts ;* they fought as a group in war and in defence against big game ; and they formed and still form a defensive unit against the supposed attacks of witches.

Above all, the village is the group within which " the good life," as the Nyakyusa conceive it, is possible. The good life consists in *ukwangala,* that is, enjoyment of the company of one's equals. The good man is one who is urbane and sociable, a fine debater, a witty raconteur, one who entertains, sharing with his fellows whatever good food or drink he may have, for *ukwangala* requires *ifyakwangalela* . . . the wherewithal for the enjoyment of good company, that is, food and beer. Conversation is held to be the school of law, of logic, and of manners ; therefore a man must not keep aloof, or live like a hermit apart in the bush, and he must live with contemporaries rather than kinsmen, since easy communication is limited between men of different generations by the respect required of juniors for their seniors. As for *ukwangala* with women, that is impossible. Women are fit for love-making, not for friendship.

Good fellowship in the village is not merely a pious ideal but a virtue with which at least outward conformity is enforced by fear of witchcraft. The man who does not *ukwangala* but is morose and solitary, or brusque in his manner, or who eats alone, grudging his neighbours a share in the food and beer his wives prepare for him, and one who neglects to provide feasts on certain recognized occasions, is likely either to be accused of practising witchcraft, or to think himself the victim of it. Witches, the Nyakyusa say, act primarily from the lust for food ; they gnaw men inside to assuage their hunger for meat, and steal the milk of cows. But they do not attack indiscriminately ; they select as victims those against whom they have a grudge. Moreover, the village, as a group, is believed to defend itself against witchcraft, but only the virtuous are protected. Evil-doers are said to be left to the witches, or directly punished by their fellows through a power closely akin to the power of witchcraft.

Witchcraft (*ubulosi*), the Nyakyusa think, is something innate and tangible ; it consists in pythons—several of them—in the bellies of men, which are discoverable at an autopsy. Certain individuals are born with it and exercise it for their own nefarious ends. Other individuals have a power called *amanga* which is also innate though not visible at an autopsy, and which is used in defence against witchcraft and to punish wrong-doers. Our Nyakyusa friends made no consistent distinction between the nature of the two types of power, but they were quite clear about the differences in use : witchcraft is used illegally and immorally by individuals, while the power of defence is used to protect the village, or falls upon wrong-doers as the chilling " breath of men," and it is exercised by the village as a whole, under the leadership of the headman. Everyone is agreed that sickness results both from witchcraft and from " the breath of men," but the interpretation of a particular case often varies with the viewpoint of the individual. The sufferer will speak angrily of " the witches," while other people tell one that he neglected to kill a cow when his wife died, or he failed to share some beer which came from his in-laws, or swore at his father, and the neighbours were angry. It is the murmuring of neighbours which brings the " chilling breath " that causes paralysis, or recurrent fever, or some other ill. Public opinion in the village is thus believed to be mystically effective. The disapproval of neighbours spells ill-health.

The first question I asked myself when I began to reflect on this peculiar system was " why age-villages ? " Why should the Nyakyusa social structure differ so profoundly from that of any other African people of whom we have evidence ? We know far too little about the history of Africa and, I think, will always know too little to offer an answer in such terms as I have offered for the development of a centralized chieftainship in Ngonde and not among the Nyakyusa. According to their own traditions, the chiefs of the Nyakyusa came down in a series of migrations from the Livingstone mountains to the East, about ten generations ago. They found in the valley a people who had not yet discovered the use of fire, but who ate their food raw, and by virtue of their great gift to the aborigines, fire, the invaders became chiefs. (It is a myth which is common enough in Africa.) Some say that the invaders also brought the first cattle. The Kinga who still live on the Livingstone mountains also acknowledge kinship with the Nyakyusa and share with them in a common sacrifice to a supposed common ancestor ; but culturally the Kinga are totally different from the Nyakyusa. They live in kinship villages, not age-villages, and have no elaborate age organization, so far as we could discover. The Nyakyusa themselves have no idea whether age-villages came in with the chiefs or were indigenous to the valley, or developed after the conquest. Their myth of origin is not fixed in time, but postulates an invention to meet a social necessity. Once, they say, a certain chief looked upon his son's wife and saw that she was beautiful and said, " she is fit to be a queen (*umwehe*)," and took her ; and men thought that very bad and said that henceforth fathers-in-law should never see their daughters-in-law lest they be tempted to commit incest with them, *and so* fathers and sons live in different villages, for if they lived in the same village father-in-law and daughter-in-law would always be seeing one another. In short, the Nyakyusa say that they live in age-villages in order to avoid incest between father-in-law and daughter-in-law.

This myth points us to other questions which we can answer and which, I think, take us further in the understanding of society than any purely chronological answer to my original question, " why age-villages ? " I asked myself next : " how does the Nyakyusa system of age-villages really differ from the age organizations of other African people ? " and : " what other peculiarities of Nyakyusa society are there which may be connected with age-villages ? "

Division of functions between successive generations is, of course, common enough. The great " coming out " ceremony of the Nyakyusa, with the transfer of power from one generation to another, is in no way unique, but is typical of many East African peoples, the Nyakyusa form being particularly close to that of the Chaga, who have the same combination of chieftainship and age-organization, and among whom also the functions of defence and administration are undertaken by the same, the ruling generation.

The peculiarity of the Nyakyusa organization consists in the fact that men of an age-set continue to live together in one village after marriage, bringing their wives to the village of the age-set. Warrior villages or barracks exist (or existed) among the Masai, the Zulu, and the Swazi. The cattle posts of the Tswana and Pedi, and the club houses of the Kipisigis and Kikuyu also provided social centres and sleeping quarters for age-sets as yet unmarried, but so far as we know only the Nyakyusa bring their wives to the living quarters of the age-set. Masai, Zulu, Swazi, Tswana and Pedi all establish their wives in the villages of agnatic kin. (I say as far as we know, for another age-village organization may well turn up elsewhere in Africa. It had not been noticed among the Nyakyusa before my husband went there, though they had been administered under the system of indirect rule for ten years, and a substantial book had been published on the Nyakyusa and Ngonde people.) It is possible also that the Nyakyusa are the only people who forbid a grown son to sleep in his father's homestead at any time. The Zulu, Swazi, Tswana and Pedi all permit warriors to sleep at home when not on duty in barracks or cattle post. Of the Masai practise I am uncertain.

This life-long territorial segregation of the generations is, as we have seen, connected by the Nyakyusa themselves with decency in sex life. For them morality consists first in the separation of the sexual activities of successive generations, and, secondly, in close friendship and co-operation with equals. The feeling that the sex activities of parents and children should be kept quite separate is, of course, very common—perhaps universal. We can see it in our own society, and it appears in one form or another in most, if not all, the East and Central African groups of which we have knowledge. Adolescent children sleep apart from their parents; avoidance taboos limit familiarity between father and daughter-in-law, and so on. The Nyakyusa peculiarity lies in the extreme to which this separation is pushed.

Why should they go to such extremes? I have no complete answer to this question but one or two points are relevant. First, the Nyakyusa have no male circumcision or initiation, no formal recognition of the sexual maturity of males; therefore, any young man past puberty is a potential mate for a woman of his own age. Where circumcision is customary no male who has not yet been initiated is regarded as adult and a grown woman scorns him as a mate even in extra-marital relations. Therefore, among the Nyakyusa grown sons are potential lovers of their fathers' junior wives, some of whom will be of their own age or younger; whereas among the Chaga and other East African groups who practise circumcision they are not acceptable to women until they have been initiated. Secondly, the marriage age of men is late and that of girls very young, so that there are many bachelors and very few girls available to them. At the same time the polygyny rate is high and most polygynists are middle-aged or elderly, so there are many young wives of polygynists who are bored with their ageing husbands. Thirdly, the Nyakyusa permit the inheritance of a father's widow by his sons, a practice regarded as improper by certain other peoples who practise the levirate. A son is required to treat all his father's wives as mothers while his father and father's full brothers are alive, and sex relations with a father's wife are treated as a heinous offence, but after the death of the father and his full brothers these same women become wives of their former sons, with the limitation that a man cannot inherit his own mother or her kinswoman. It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that the seduction of the young wives of an ageing father is a common theme for scandal, and that a father's jealous fears are matched by those of his son.

I argue that there is a connection between the existence of age-villages and the fear of incest between step-son and step-mother on the one hand, and between father-in-law and daughter-in-law on the other, and suggest that certain features of the Nyakyusa social system facilitate incest of the first type, and so increase fear of incest of the second type. Fathers drive their adolescent sons out of their village lest they make love to their mothers, and the sons reciprocate, insisting that when they do marry they should continue to live apart lest their fathers seduce their wives. The incest theme elaborated in one fashion among people organized in clans, and practising clan exogamy, and in another among people practising brother-sister avoidance, finds yet a different expression in age-villages, of which the overt purpose is the separation of sons and mothers, of fathers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

The constant emphasis on the importance of *ukwangala*—good fellowship with contemporaries—is both an expression and a condition of the age-village organization. Kinship bonds are strong; wealth in cattle depends upon co-operation with kinsmen and good health is believed to be dependent on such co-operation also; but the good life, as the Nyakyusa define it, can only be achieved in the age-village which cuts across kinship connections. The fear of witchcraft and "the breath of men" compels generosity and conformity with public opinion in the village and creates a sense of mutual dependence between neighbours. It is my contention that the peculiar form of witch beliefs among the Nyakyusa, with the emphasis on lust for meat as a main incentive to witchcraft, the belief in the defensive power of the village headman and other men in the village, and the fear of "the breath of men," an innate power exercised by a village group to punish a member who has done wrong, is directly related to the age-village organization.