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978-0-521-09554-9 - The Analysis of Social Change: Based on Observations  
in Central Africa

Godfrey and Monica Wilson

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

### CENTRAL AFRICAN SOCIETY: A PROBLEM FOR ANALYSIS

#### (a) INTRODUCTORY

IN trying to understand men's relations in Central Africa to-day we have assumed that a science of sociology is possible; that is, that there are necessary connections between social facts which can be discovered. Seeking these connections in Central Africa we have formulated a number of hypotheses. These, being scientific, are tentative; and the limitations of our own knowledge, which prevent our testing them out in a wide range of historical situations, make it all the more necessary for us to emphasize their tentative character. They do, however, seem to illuminate the particular field of Central Africa; and it is of this alone that we seek to persuade you. If we succeed in doing so it may then be worth considering their wider relevance; for connections established in one situation must, albeit qualified and reformulated, be applicable in others also.

We speak of 'Central Africa' in order to avoid cumbersome phrases, but our field is more limited than this term at first suggests. We exclude the old Arab civilization of the east coast, except in so far as through ivory and slave traders it affected the interior. We exclude also the non-British territories—the Belgian Congo, Portuguese East Africa and Angola—with which we have no acquaintance. The field to which we refer consists of Tanganyika, Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, with the exception of the coastal belt of Tanganyika.

Within this field we have a detailed knowledge of three

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African groups—the Nyakyusa of south Tanganyika, with whom we lived for nearly three years (1934–8); the people of Ngonde (1937), which is a district in north Nyasaland, whose language and culture resembles that of the adjoining Nyakyusa; and the semi-detribalized urban group in Broken Hill, Northern Rhodesia (1939–40). We have also visited the Lupa gold fields in south Tanganyika (1937), on which the Nyakyusa and the people of Ngonde together provide a third of the African labour; and one of us has visited the Bemba tribe in north-eastern Rhodesia (1938), which provides another third of that labour. To the old social system of the Bemba we have constantly to refer, and in doing so we rely on the work of Audrey Richards who has studied them intensively (1930–4). The urban group in Broken Hill is largely drawn from the Bemba and allied tribes in north-eastern Rhodesia.

For material on other groups we rely on the work of Smith and Dale among the Ila of Northern Rhodesia, of Read among the Ngoni of Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, of Gluckman among the Lozi of Northern Rhodesia, of the Culwicks on the Bena of Tanganyika, and on Government reports. Some comparative evidence is drawn from the Union of South Africa, where one of us did field work in a reserve (Pondoland), in town locations, and on European farms (1931–3).

(b) FROM PRIMITIVE TO CIVILIZED

Within living memory men's relations in Central Africa were primitive; now they are being very rapidly civilized. Merely to chronicle this change, in however great detail, is not to understand it. A chronicle gives us little light on what has determined the changes which have taken place, and what their future implications are likely to be. We

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look therefore for the connections between the changes taking place, and in finding these seek to demonstrate what changes must follow, if certain others are made.

We observe, for instance, that in the primitive societies kinship had a very great importance; that in the more civilized groups of the modern world it has far less importance, and that among Africans the traditional importance of many relations of kinship is decreasing. Thus far it is mere chronicle. But, we ask, is this change in kinship a necessary concomitant of the change from primitive to civilized, or is it characteristic only of particular civilizations? Is a policy aimed at maintaining the traditional kinship obligations likely to be successful? Can a Government assume that under modern conditions Africans will continue to support infirm relatives? And so on.

(i) *Economic Changes*

The economy of the primitive societies was one of subsistence agriculture, or subsistence pastoralism, or a mixture of both, with the addition of a few simple crafts. There was little specialization, and, with one great exception, there was only local trade. Each village or settlement—and most of these were small—produced nearly everything it needed. The one great exception to this local self-sufficiency was the trade in ivory and slaves, which linked some, though not all, of the tribes of Central Africa to the outside world. Cloth, beads, and muzzle-loading guns flowed in; ivory and slaves flowed out; and this trade affected the structure even of remote tribes. Except along the main trade routes, however, the relations involved were tenuous, and local self-sufficiency remained the dominant feature of economic life. The only means of transport were man-power and dugout canoes, the use of which was limited by the absence, in many areas, of navigable water. There were no wheeled vehicles,

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and riding and pack animals were rarely used. Money was unknown.

There was little capital accumulation down the generations; for such capital equipment as existed was mostly as perishable as man, while skill and knowledge—which also have a capital value—had only the narrow channels of oral tradition and personal example in which to flow.

The economy of Central Africa to-day is part of a world organization; there is no longer any local self-sufficiency. Foreign cloth and foreign hoes have now become necessities of life for the majority of the African population, while foreign bicycles and sewing machines, tin dishes, ploughs, and padlocks are increasingly bought. Payment for these foreign goods is made by the export of copper, vanadium, zinc, lead, tobacco, beeswax and timber from Northern Rhodesia; sisal, gold, rice, tea and coffee from Tanganyika; cotton, tea and tobacco from Nyasaland. Even the most remote villages are intimately affected by fluctuations in the price of these on the world market.

With the foreign trade, an internal trade between the newly grown towns and the country has developed. The town workers buy goods from the peasants, and the peasants buy foreign goods in town. At the same time some old businesses have increased in range. Pots made on the shores of Lake Nyasa, for example, are sold over a much wider area than formerly, and dried fish reaches villages where none came before. Railways and metalled roads have been built, and lorries and bicycles have largely displaced the porter. The principal towns are linked by air services. Everywhere money is in general use.

Not only is Central Africa now a specialized unit in the world economy, importing some goods and exporting others, but internally also its economy is much more specialized than before. The raising of food is no longer

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everyone's business. Formerly the few specialized workers, such as smiths and doctors, engaged in subsistence farming like their neighbours, and practised their specializations only in their spare time. But to-day production for export, commerce, government, religion, education and transport engage a host of full-time workers whose food is supplied by others. The most obvious mark of this is the growth of towns. The number of different specialisms, moreover, has grown enormously.

In comparison with the more civilized areas of the modern world, however, the economy of Central Africa is still relatively unspecialized. Villages usually raise most of their own food, and build their own houses without outside help, and without dividing the processes among the different families. Nor has the multiplication of specialisms anywhere yet equalled that of more civilized lands. Specialization and interdependence with distant groups have grown continuously for fifty years, and seem still to be growing.

The capital accumulated by many centuries of civilization is being increasingly used in Central Africa. Millions of pounds worth of capital equipment has been imported in the form of mining plant, railway stock, improved livestock, commercial and farm equipment; while the accumulated knowledge and skills of civilization are being applied to the development of the country. The standard of living has risen considerably.

In sum, we have here a contrast between a number of unspecialized, locally self-sufficient, non-accumulating, and poor primitive economies, and a highly differentiated, universally interdependent, rapidly accumulating, and rich civilized economy. We observe that economic activity in Central Africa has steadily approximated in type to the second and seems to be still doing so. We seek the necessary

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implications of this economic change. How does it affect law and religion? Is it necessarily connected with the decline in the importance of kinship?

(ii) *Political Changes*

The political units of old Central Africa were small. Law was often effective in groups of a few thousand only. Occasional paramount chiefs were honoured by as many as four hundred thousand people, but even in their areas investigation often reveals an absence of political unity, the constituent chiefdoms recognizing no common legal authority, and war being endemic among them.<sup>1</sup> Political authority was closely linked with religious status and with personal wealth; chiefs, headmen, and elders being usually the high-priests of their respective areas, and the richest men in them.

To-day the three Territories each include scores of previously independent political units, and are themselves integral parts of the British Empire of 540,000,000 people. Peace is enforced and law is effective throughout the Empire and, by international agreement, beyond its boundaries. All three Territories are administered through the traditional authorities on the principle of 'indirect rule', but these authorities are under the control of British administrative officers stationed throughout the country, and each Territory has a Central Government. Policy is directed from London and is affected by political conditions in Europe. The form of local administration in Tanganyika, for example, was radically altered because Germany was defeated in 1918, and subsequent policy has been modified by the fact that Tanganyika is a Mandated Territory, not a Colony.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Godfrey Wilson, *The Constitution of Ngonde*, Rhodes-Livingstone Papers, No. 3, 1939.

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Within this large system local centralization is continuously going on. While some of the traditional authorities, such as paramount chiefs and their councils, are increasing in judicial and administrative power, others—village headmen, village elders, and many local chiefs—are losing this power. In some places new paramountcies or tribal councils have been created, where none but local authorities existed before.

Political authority in the new system is less immediately linked with religious status and wealth. Among the Europeans, Church and State are separately organized, different people having the highest status in each, while the wealthiest men are not always those in positions of great authority. Among the Africans a similar differentiation is becoming more and more evident. The religious power of the traditional authorities is being transferred to European missionaries and to African ministers and elders; in wealth they are no longer solely prominent, being equalled or outdone by their subjects who have become clerks and shopkeepers and mechanics.

We seek to discover how this change from a number of small, locally decentralized organizations, within which political authority was closely linked with religious and economic status, to an enormous, centralized organization, within which authority is less immediately linked with religious and economic status, is related to the economic changes already described. Is a high degree of centralization inevitable in a civilized society?

### (iii) *Technical and Scientific Changes*

The language areas of old Central Africa were small. Mutual understanding was sometimes confined to a few thousand people, and nowhere, we think, exceeded half a million. Though the languages were nearly all related, it

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appears that a very small proportion of the population spoke any but their own.

To-day English is spoken by practically all the immigrants and by an increasing number of Africans. Of the Africans over 10 years of age in Nyasaland 6 % claim some knowledge of English.<sup>1</sup> Four or five African languages are dominating the others. Swahili is used in trade and administration, and is taught in schools, all over Tanganyika; it is not confined to the coast and slave routes, as formerly. Nyanja is spreading in Nyasaland; and Nyanja, Bemba and Kololo in Northern Rhodesia. A *lingua franca*, 'kitchen Kaffir', is considerably used, and affords a degree of understanding between European and African, and between Africans of different tribes. Communication is further facilitated by a decrease in dialect differences. The people of Ngonde and the neighbouring Nyakyusa, for instance, say that they could hardly understand one another in the old days, and the speech of the old men is still markedly different, but that of the young men is now almost identical.

As there was a certain similarity of grammar and vocabulary between the different Bantu languages of old Central Africa, so there was a general similarity in the crafts of the people who spoke them. It is easy to mistake a flat Ndali basket for one from Kalobo many hundred miles away, or a Bemba beer strainer from Northern Rhodesia for one from Pondoland on the South African coast. Nyakyusa and Pondo sleeping mats are hardly distinguishable to the untrained eye. But the details of style were as local as languages. The decoration and strands of the weave differ in Ndali and Kalobo baskets, as do the edges of Bemba and Pondo beer strainers. Museum experts can place spears and pots, baskets and bead skirts by peculiarities of construction and ornament. Most arte-

<sup>1</sup> *Nyasaland Protectorate, Census Report, 1931.*

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facts had only a local circulation, and since lasting mediums were scarce, the artefacts passed down the generations were few. Excavations on Bantu sites yield little but skeletons, potsherds and occasional iron tools. All the old techniques were, by modern standards, very simple ones.

Now local differences in style of dress and furnishing, architecture, music and dancing, though still greater than in civilized countries, are becoming less marked. Foreign cloth was at first used in local idioms—Lozi women are distinguished by their full bustled skirts made after the fashion of the nineties when Paris missionaries first reached their country—but similar African fashions now spread over wide areas, and European dress is commonly worn. New styles of basket work are borrowed from neighbouring tribes—in 1936 Nyakyusa women were just learning to weave sleeping mats in what they called the Swahili pattern, quite different from their traditional style—and houses and furnishing of European design are appearing everywhere. In Broken Hill the less sophisticated dance traditional dances, each tribe its own, the Ila even bringing skins to stage their famous lion dance; but houseboys and clerks, irrespective of tribe, dance foxtrots and tangos in the cast-off clothes of their employers. All the towns have African dance clubs where foreign dances alone are performed.

Techniques are growing in elaboration and are being applied to more durable materials, while the accumulated technical skill of Europe is being increasingly mastered by Africans. The highly skilled are specialists.

Knowledge in the old societies was parochial and unspecialized. There was no writing, and though old men could recite genealogies of chiefs, and epics of victory or migration, they were ignorant of the everyday doings of their ancestors more than two generations back. Now the accumulated knowledge of a world society is spreading in

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Central Africa. Schools organized by missions and Government are scattered throughout the three Territories. In Nyasaland nearly 50% of the African children attend schools of some sort, in Northern Rhodesia about 36%, in Tanganyika 18%. But the percentage in schools of a reasonable degree of efficiency is considerably less—about 15% in Nyasaland, 12% in Northern Rhodesia, and 2.5% in Tanganyika.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the range of knowledge has

<sup>1</sup> These figures were arrived at as follows:

*Children in School (Africans only)*

*Nyasaland (Report of Education Department, 1939—no detailed statistics given in 1940 and 1941 Reports):*

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| In Government and aided schools           | 61,207    |
| In unaided schools                        | 145,244   |
| Population                                | 1,673,000 |
| Percentage of population scholars         | 12.3%     |
| Percentage of population in aided schools | 3.6%      |

*Northern Rhodesia (Native Education, Annual Report, 1939):*

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| In Government and aided schools            | 42,674    |
| In unaided schools                         | 81,710    |
| Population                                 | 1,366,425 |
| Percentage of population scholars          | 9%        |
| Percentage in Government and aided schools | 3.1%      |

The Director of Education reports in 1942 that the enrolment has risen by approximately 100% in Government and aided schools since 1939.

*Tanganyika Territory (Report of the Education Department, 1937—no detailed statistics given in 1939 Report):*

|  |                        |
|--|------------------------|
| In Government and aided schools            | 31,150                 |
| In unaided schools                         | 'Over 190,000 claimed' |
| Population                                 | 5,022,640              |
| Percentage of population scholars          | 4.4%                   |
| Percentage in Government and aided schools | 0.62%                  |

Taking children of school age as 25% of the population, the proportion of children in schools of any sort in Central Africa is then 26%, in Government or aided schools 7%.

The unaided schools are evangelistic centres maintained by Christian missions. According to the 1937 *Report of the Tanganyika Education Department*, 'It is not unfair to say that these institutions are for the most part housed in rude shacks, staffed by semi-literates, devoid of equipment, and lacking in competent supervision.'