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1 The people and their country

The Nyamwezi are a Tanzanian people. As is well known Tanzania consists of the mainland area formerly called Tanganyika and the offshore islands of Zanzibar and Pemba which combined with the mainland to form the present United Republic of Tanzania in 1964. Its northern neighbours are Uganda (with whom it recently has been at war) and also Kenya, while to the west it borders on Ruanda, Burundi and Zaire. To the south are Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. The country has an area (c. 940,000 square kilometres) some seven times the size of that of the United Kingdom, and a population of just over 17½ million according to the official 1978 census figures which were released to the Press in January 1979.

The Tanzanian mainland contains a wide variety of ecological zones including highland areas in the north and south, a coastal plain edged by the Indian ocean, and some very fertile lake-shore regions e.g. on the western side of Lake Victoria. There is also a large central tableland, which is sometimes called the 'cultivation steppe' and which includes the Nyamwezi area. This tableland is divided from the coast by the Masai plains and other relatively arid areas. The country has a number of important towns such as Dar es Salaam and Dodoma (the present and planned future capitals respectively), Arusha, Mwanza and Tabora, but the urban population is relatively small and over 90 per cent of Tanzanians live and farm in rural areas. As one might expect, the forms of farming they adopt – subsistence farming plus cash-cropping, for example, or pastoralism – vary considerably from one zone to another.

Although they are still culturally rather mixed and speak a wide variety of local languages, Tanzanians are of course politically, economically, and in other ways united within their nation whose official language, Swahili, is becoming increasingly well understood and widely used. Mainland Tanganyika became independent in December 1961 with the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) as its widely supported ruling party. It formally became a one-Party state in 1965, though this did little more than bring the constitution into line with political reality. Since Independence the country has enjoyed the leadership and guidance of its regularly re-elected President, Julius Nyerere, who headed the Independence movement and is often fondly

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spoken of by Tanzanians and others as '*Mwalimu*' (the teacher). In 1977 TANU was amalgamated with the ruling Afro-Shirazi Party of Zanzibar to form the new Revolutionary Party (*Chama cha Mapinduzi* or CCM). This, like TANU, is under President Nyerere's chairmanship and it has maintained TANU's commitment to socialist political and economic development and with it the avoidance of serious cleavages of wealth and power between different sections of the people. How well this is being achieved, and how best it might be so, has been the subject of considerable debate at various times within the country, and indeed outside, but the aim itself persists and appears genuinely to have helped to limit inequalities. The President himself has been the most important single architect of Tanzanian socialism, and his speeches and writings on the subject – the Arusha Declaration of 1967 for example, and his formulations of the related ideas of 'African socialism' and *Ujamaa* – have become internationally well known. For him, as Nellis (1972, p.102) has noted, 'economic affluence is inseparable from social justice', and Nyerere himself has written in his *Socialism and Rural Development* that the objective of socialism in Tanzania is

> To build a society in which all members have equal rights and equal opportunities; in which all can live at peace . . . without suffering or imposing injustice, being exploited or exploiting; and in which all have a gradually increasing basic level of material welfare before any individual lives in luxury. (Nyerere, 1967a, p.4)

It may be noted that the Swahili title of the above quoted work is *Ujamaa Vijijini* (literally socialism in the villages) and, as this suggests, a main element in the President's programme for socialist development has been an attempt to persuade the people to establish *ujamaa* (socialist collective) villages as the basic units of Tanzanian society. As will be seen, part of the present work (see especially Chapter 3) is devoted to examining the relevance of this for the Nyamwezi.

Being Tanzanians is important for the Nyamwezi, but this does not of course tell us much about which Tanzanians in particular they are. Nor is there any satisfactory single answer to this question. The first literary record of people called Nyamwezi appears to have been made by Europeans who visited the East African coast at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the name itself seems to have developed out of trading contacts between inland peoples and coastal dwellers.

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It probably at first meant simply 'westerners', and in the nineteenth century it seems to have been used at least occasionally to describe both those who came from what is commonly known today as *Unyamwezi* (Nyamwezi country) and some of their neighbours to the west and north. Such directional names have been fairly common in this region as elsewhere in the world. Thus the closely related people living to the north of Unyamwezi bear the name Sukuma, which is vernacular for 'north', and this term is also used more generally in the area to refer (with a small 's' as it were) to any people including Nyamwezi who are living to one's north.

The relativity of such names suggests that the Nyamwezi might perhaps be best considered as those who simply happen to be or to have been called such by others. There is an element of truth in this, but the situation is in fact more complex. For although there can be argument about the long-term stability, exact location, and blurred nature of some of its boundaries, the people's home area of west-central Tanzania has come to be widely known as Unyamwezi both by themselves and by others and the name has nowadays lost its former directional connotations. In addition, there is a Bantu language (*Kinyamwezi*), whose edges are again not wholly clearcut, and a range of local custom, albeit varied, changing and not always followed, which are considered to be Nyamwezi; and at least as importantly, there are a large number of people – probably well over half a million of them these days – who are likely in some contexts to describe themselves as Nyamwezi alongside of, and indeed as part of, being Tanzanians. The contexts in question vary from official ones, of court procedures, for example, and census returns at least up to 1967, to a wide range of more informal situations in which people wish to make a broad comparison between themselves and others. Like the origin of the name itself, some of these situations arise from travel to towns and rural areas outside Unyamwezi. People on such occasions may seek help from other Nyamwezi, or they may engage in forms of institutionalised joking, *utani*, which are customary between them and the members of some comparable groups near the coast such as the Zaramu and Zigua peoples, and they may also seek help from these joking partners. On other occasions, the term may be used within Unyamwezi itself, perhaps to differentiate the people from some immigrant groups such as the Tusi, who come from areas like Kigoma Region and Burundi to the west and north-west, or more generally to draw attention to some quality of character or an area of custom

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which they attribute to themselves, sometimes in self-praise or self-criticism, as a mark of their identity. I discuss the relevance of custom for the people in some detail later (see especially Chapter 5). As to qualities of character, it is of course notoriously difficult to generalise without drifting into caricature on issues of this sort. It may perhaps be mentioned here, however, that many Nyamwezi see themselves quite justifiably as a very sociable and hospitable people in their dealing with their fellow villagers and with others to whom they feel they can relate on friendly and roughly equal terms; and they also know that they may at times seem to be unreliable to those who try to get them to agree to do things which they are not very keen to do. For they often prefer to appear to accede to a request and then fail for some reason to fulfil it, rather than to refuse outright and perhaps give offence; and they base this on a liking for politeness coupled with a not unreasonable premiss that people should be very sensitive about what they try to demand of others.

All this goes with great care in their use of words more generally, and with an emphasis also upon proper etiquette which is most immediately clear in their customary greetings to each other when they meet. No encounter is normally allowed to become a ‘business’ one until the persons concerned have enquired, often at some length, about each other’s health and the state of their homes and families, and even then the main matter to be dealt with may often be approached gradually and indirectly rather than ‘full-frontally’. Such behaviour can easily appear pedantic to a less formally-minded outsider, and I myself initially found it frustrating on occasion, but it is valued locally for the contribution which it makes to orderly and productive relationships between parties who are seen to demonstrate a mutual respect and voice a mutual concern for each other. These qualities of sensitivity and concern are, I may add, also clearly visible in the local patterns of hospitality. A respected and not simply casual visitor is not merely generously fed. Careful efforts are made to ensure that he retains his own identity during a visit and does not simply become his host’s dependant. He should ideally be provided with his own place to stay which will serve as his own base of social operations, and food and drink should be provided both for his consumption and disposal. On one visit on which I accompanied a friend, beer was brought for us in a hut set aside for our visit, and this was ours and ours alone to drink and distribute to others who then became our guests. Again, in 1974–5 arrangements were made for the wife and daughter-

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in-law of an old friend who lived nearby to cook for me during my stay. I was told that I could not pay for these services directly but if I wished to help out with the family's needs from time to time, that was up to me and would be welcome. Food was brought the fifty yards or so to my tent each day and enough was always brought for me to be able to share with at least one other person comfortably. I was always genuinely welcome to drop in and share food with the family but the arrangements were designed to ensure that I could be both host and guest.

Most Nyamwezi speak Kinyamwezi as their mother tongue and either live in or come from the Nyamwezi area. In addition to this, however, there is a widespread notion that ethnic identity – being Nyamwezi or Sumbwa or Tusi for example – is inherited from one's father. Thus it is possible for a young man born in Dar es Salaam and growing up speaking mainly Swahili to classify himself as Nyamwezi on this basis, and it is similarly possible for long-term residents of Unyamwezi to hark back to their own father's non-Nyamwezi origins. On the other hand, it is also true that such latter persons and their descendants can fairly easily begin to characterise themselves as Nyamwezi if they wish to do so, and I have met people who have 'become' Nyamwezi in this way, and may describe themselves as having done so, after being born in the country, or coming as a child, and residing there for many years. That such change is possible is in keeping with the open nature of Nyamwezi society. So too, however, is the further important fact that, with the partial exception of Tusi immigrants from the west and north-west, ethnic identity is not normally of great practical significance in the internal social system of the area's local communities; and it appears that these days even the Tusi have started to become more fully absorbed into the fabric of rural society despite their deep interest in pastoralism, a tendency to emphasise their own cultural distinctiveness, and an earlier common preference, associated with both these features, for keeping themselves residentially apart from others and marrying among themselves (cf. Abrahams, 1970).

Historically, an important factor in this situation of fluidity and openness, and at the same time a main source of continuity and order, was the institution of Nyamwezi chiefship (*butemi*). This, like the system which replaced it after Independence, provided a territorial frame – or rather a series of such frames, since the area was never unified politically under a single chief – within which people could move fairly easily from one place to another. Each chiefdom had a

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ruling family whose ancestors are usually said to have come into the area many generations ago. The country is typically described as having been empty or, at most, only sparsely populated at that time, and the newcomers are said to have carved out domains for themselves which at first expanded and then subdivided as the population grew. Sometimes they are said to have usurped the power of a previously established group. New subjects, both from other Nyamwezi chiefdoms and beyond, appear generally to have been welcomed by the chiefs and their subordinate authorities who gave them land and offered them political and ritual security in return for orderly behaviour, tribute and allegiance. Provided these were given without hindrance, little if any direct pressure seems to have been put on non-Nyamwezi by a chief or his subordinates to change their ethnic identity or special patterns of behaviour in such areas as marriage, religious ritual and food taboos. A similarly undemanding pattern was found also at the village level where a main concern, as I have already noted, has been that all villages should co-operate and live well together rather than all slavishly follow the same customs as a matter of principle. It is clear, however, that Unyamwezi's chiefdoms and villages have served nonetheless as a kind of melting pot in which a substantial degree of customary uniformity has tended to emerge in this atmosphere of tolerance as a natural development from the interactions of their members. It may also be mentioned in this context that, despite their own external provenance, the ruling families have in many ways been perceived as Nyamwezi *par exellence*. By virtue of their royal birth and office, chiefs were held to be the ritual and political 'owners' of their chiefdom and it was in considerable part through attachment to them as kin and/or subjects that the connection between many Nyamwezi and their country, Unyamwezi, was traditionally established and maintained.

I have dwelt at some length on these questions of identity because it seems important to affirm that fluidity, change and contextual variation – in short '*becoming*' – are as much a feature of the situation as are persistence or stability and '*being*'. The latter qualities are undoubtedly of great significance but they are usually more easily grasped and expressed, and they tend to be all the more deceptive for this. In the present case they can all too easily obscure both the normality of change and the fact that openness, both to new people and to new ideas, has been a major feature of the vitality which I believe characterises Nyamwezi society and culture.

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The Nyamwezi area today is about 90,000 square kilometres in extent and it covers most of the Tabora, Urambo, Nzega and Igunga Districts of Tanzania's Tabora Region and the neighbouring eastern half of Kahama District in Shinyanga Region. It is part of the Tanzanian 'cultivation steppe', and it mostly consists of undulating country about 1,200 metres above sea level. There are some rocky hills and ridges rising as much as 300 metres above the general level of the country, and lower though occasionally spectacular outcrops of bare granite rock are fairly common. There are some rivers but they do not usually flow during the drier months. The year falls into two main divisions, a rainy season when the people are most actively engaged in agriculture, and a dry season when there is more suitable opportunity for travel, housebuilding and leisure. The main period of rainfall is between November and April. Precipitation averages around 85 centimetres per year but it is rather variable from year to year and place to place, and it is by no means always well distributed within a single rainy season. Mean average temperatures in the area are around 23 degrees centigrade and they range between mean maxima of about 29 degrees to mean minima of about 17 degrees.

In most parts of the country a regular sequence of vegetation zones is found. Lower levels of grass or thorn bush acacia steppe, known locally as *mbuga*, are succeeded by higher levels of park steppe and woodland including some thick forest. *Mbuga* areas are often liable to flood in the wet season and they are as such largely uninhabited, though they are used for pasture and some agriculture. Some forest areas, on the other hand, yield little or no ground water and this, coupled with their poor soils in many cases and their abundance of insect pests, including tsetse, can make them relatively unattractive for settlement. In general, the most settled areas are those of park steppe and relatively well-watered woodland, though even here the soils are often not especially good.

Despite the regularity of these patterns, too static a view of the topography of the region needs to be avoided. The overall appearance of the country in the rainy season is quite different from that in the drier months when dull clouds and lush greenery give way to bright skies, dry dust and sear vegetation; and the opening up of an area to settlement of course sharply affects its character over time. Tracts of almost treeless country may be found which once were woodland and have since been cleared, and secondary bush quickly springs up in areas where settlement has been abandoned. Such processes of transform-

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ation still go on today and parts of the area have changed radically in the last thirty years as they have been subject to intensive settlement by newcomers from other parts of Unyamwezi or nearby. The Igunga area to the east of Nzega is a major case in point. In the early 1940s it was a remote and fairly sparsely populated part of Nzega District, and it began about that time to attract increasing numbers of Sukuma settlers, often with large herds of cattle, from Shinyanga District to the north. Some cotton cash-cropping began to develop there in the 1950s when a local ginnery was opened as an experiment. By the 1970s the area was much more accessible since a major east–west trunk road now passed through it, and big cattle-owners were beginning to be pushed south into Tabora District and beyond as the population increased and more and more land was taken up for cotton and food crops.[1] Igunga is nowadays a well-connected, prosperous and relatively densely settled part of the country and it recently became an Administrative District in its own right. It may also be mentioned here that some parts of southern Kahama District, such as Mpunze and Ushetu, have experienced large influxes of human and cattle population in more recent years, and here, as elsewhere in the past, tsetse fly appears to have been driven back as settlement has rapidly expanded.

Agriculture supplemented by animal husbandry is the mainstay of Nyamwezi economic life. Mostly it is carried out on family fields with family labour supplemented at key times by neighbours, relatives and some hired help, but there have been some communal ventures in *ujamaa* villages (see Chapter 3). Most cultivation is still done by hand-hoe, but the use of ox-ploughs has increased and tractors are beginning to be used for work in some *mbuga* areas and other suitable terrain. The use of tractors, however, is of course very much dependent upon internationally determined fuel costs and supplies and seems unlikely to increase dramatically in the near future. A wide variety of crops are grown, though not all of them are equally popular and viable in all parts of the area and some noticeable changes have occurred in preferences over the last twenty years. Bulrush millet, for example, was a major crop in northern Unyamwezi in the 1950s, but it was much less widely grown in 1974–5. This appears to have been due to a complex combination of mainly technical factors, including a shift of preference towards maize as a relatively high yield crop, and also increasing difficulties in coping with birds which have always been a nuisance but which became more and more devastating as they concentrated on a diminishing millet acreage. One reason for the

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increased preference for maize has been the need for more land and more time for cash crops, especially cotton and tobacco which are now much more extensively grown in the area than was the case at the close of the colonial period. People are aware, however, that maize takes more out of the soil and is a less drought-resistant crop than either bulrush millet or sorghum, which has apparently also become less popular than it used to be, and there is some evidence that the trend away from these two crops may have been reversed a little in more recent years.

Rice is another cash crop of importance and some sunflower is also grown for sale. Rice also appears to be eaten more often than it was in the 1950s. The main staple food, however, remains stiff porridge (*bugalli*), made with flour from maize or other grain (or on occasion from cassava), and it is eaten either with meat or, more commonly, with a vegetable relish made perhaps from beans, or mushrooms, or leaves of spinach or cassava, and commonly cooked in a groundnut base. Sweet potatoes are also grown – these are the traditional food, with groundnuts, for lunch breaks during agricultural work – and some people with access to good water supplies also produce onions and tomatoes and some tree-borne fruits including oranges. Bananas are grown in some places but they are mainly eaten as a fruit, rather than as a staple food as in some other areas of East Africa. Apart of course from water, the most common drink is local beer, made from maize or sorghum, and this is especially popular at weekends. Some distilled alcohol and also tea, coffee and soft drinks are also occasionally consumed.

The most important livestock holdings are in cattle, of which there are close upon 1½ million in the area. The numbers held in any one place tend to vary with the incidence of population movement and they have risen greatly in many districts owing to the immigration of large numbers of Sukuma, often with big herds. Tusi immigration was important in the past in this respect but is much less so today. Disease can seriously reduce cattle numbers, and it is not always easily controlled. In the past rinderpest and east-coast fever took widespread toll of cattle holdings, but the main problems I have recently observed appear to be confined to particular localities. For instance many cattle were dying in and immediately around Busangi village in the early 1970s, while they appeared to be flourishing in other parts of the wider area administered from there. In addition to cattle, smallstock in the form of goats and sheep and also chickens are kept by the people.

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Wildlife is also a source of meat, but hunting is very strictly controlled these days after a relatively free period following Independence. Some hunts are carried out with nets, and individual hunters also pursue game with rifles, modern shot guns or old fashioned muzzle-loading, smooth-bore weapons. Some parts of Unyamwezi previously well stocked with game have become depleted of it, not so much because of hunting as because of human population movement into them. This is true of parts of the Igunga area, for example, and also of some parts of northern Kahama District. It may be noted here that hunting has a long and important history in Unyamwezi. The founders of ruling dynasties are typically said to have come originally as hunters into their eventual domains, and elephant hunting for ivory was a dangerous but very profitable activity in the nineteenth century. Moreover, although relatively few people have regularly engaged in hunting in recent decades it still has romantic appeal and is the masculine pursuit *par excellence* in the eyes of many Nyamwezi.

Although the people are dependent on their agriculture for survival, it is important to stress that theirs has not typically been a closed economy. As my earlier discussion of their name implied, the Nyamwezi had already started in the early nineteenth century to be well known for their long-distance trading journeys to the coast and elsewhere,[2] and their country subsequently began to be regularly visited by traders from the coast. These included Indian, Swahili, and Arab merchants and some of these founded the first settlement at Tabora which they initially called Kazé. Very many thousands of Nyamwezi travelled to the coast during the nineteenth century as traders or as porters on large caravans, and many have travelled widely during the present century as labour migrants to agricultural estates and elsewhere. Such labour migration, which was still quite popular in the 1950s, and the earlier participation in the caravan trade seem to have had their romantic and adventurous side, but they were nonetheless fundamentally responses to economic opportunities and pressures. Light soils and unpredictable rainfall tend in themselves to make agriculture somewhat precarious in this part of Tanzania, and it is not surprising that the people have been tempted to seek wealth from external sources. There has also been, however, a long and complex feedback to their agricultural activities from their involvement with the outside world. Nineteenth-century warfare and raiding between chiefdoms and the emergence of major warrior chiefs such as Mirambo, whom Stanley dubbed 'Napoleon of Central Africa', seem