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R. G. Abrahams

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## CHANGING CULTURES

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# The Nyamwezi Today

A Tanzanian People in the 1970s

R.G. ABRAHAMS

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and Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge*

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## Preface

I first visited the Nyamwezi of west-central Tanzania in late 1957 as a Junior Research Fellow of the East African Institute of Social Research, and I lived among them and their fellow villagers for a little over two years collecting material for my doctorate and, as a friend there put it, 'growing up'. During the years which followed, my connection with and interest in them was maintained through academic work and a spasmodic correspondence; and it was with great pleasure and excitement – not untinged with diffidence about how welcome I might be after so long an interval – that I returned among them in 1974 for a further period of research and, with it, the opportunity to renew old ties and perhaps establish new ones. As was not surprising, a great deal that I had left behind was much the same. Many of the people I had known were still in the same area, though others had of course moved elsewhere or had died and yet others had grown from small children I had teased and played with into married men and women. Most people were still farmers trying to make a living out of their relatively unpromising soils, and much of their familial and religious life did not seem to be radically different. And to cap all this, the warmth and generosity of the hospitality which my former neighbours extended to me, and the testimony it gave that Nyamwezi society was still one of the most friendly and open that one could hope to encounter, made it tempting to feel that little had changed apart perhaps from oneself. For as an old acquaintance asked me as he surveyed my greying hairs, 'How can you have got so old while we are just the same?'

And yet, even my first journey in October 1974 from Kahama District Headquarters to Busangi, where I wished to stay again, brought evidence of serious change. The movement for political independence which I had witnessed at the local level in the late fifties had, of course, culminated not long after in the founding of the new state of Tanzania; and although the District Office was still housed in the same buildings as before, it was a Tanzanian Area Commissioner who now had given me permission to proceed out to the village where I was to live. The route I took carried me past the site of Butumwa village,

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where I had stayed on first arrival in the area and again for several months before I left in early 1960. The mud-brick house which my neighbours had built for me as a kindness and a token of their acceptance of me had almost disappeared – it had been used by others for a time and then gradually fallen into decay – but this was only the most personal part of a broader scene of desolation which Butumwa presented. Many of its houses and homesteads still stood, but the population had been moved with those of several other villages some weeks before to a site about a mile away which had been chosen by the government for a new large compact village settlement. Only one house within sight of where I stood was still occupied – by a young man and his wife who had been expecting a baby at the time of the move. They had been allowed to stay in their existing house for the time being. Most other villagers had gone to their plots in the new village where I found them in the often rather makeshift housing which they had hastily built for themselves until the opportunity arose to build more solid and elaborate accommodation. This new village was part of a national scheme to resettle the population of the country in large compact settlements which could, it was hoped, be better provided with schools and dispensaries and, eventually, even running water. It was also envisaged that the new communities would be able to engage in more productive forms of agriculture than the previous patterns of settlement permitted. In addition, although the point was played down somewhat at the time, it was assumed by many that the new ‘development villages’ (*vijiji vya maendeleo*), as they were called, would be encouraged to engage in *ujamaa* (socialist collective) enterprises. This and much else was as yet uncertain, but one thing at least was clear. Although change in itself was nothing new to Unyamwezi, never before had the Government and the state penetrated with such force and vigour into the inner recesses of village and domestic life.

There was further evidence of major change when I proceeded from this village to the nearby local government headquarters. The buildings were again much as I had left them, but they were no longer occupied by a local chief and his henchmen. I knew that chiefship as political office had been abolished several years before, and I now encountered for the first time the officers who replaced the chiefly regime. The former chief’s house was now assigned to the Divisional Secretary, a TANU official and former teacher, and other houses were occupied by a magistrate and by another party man, the Ward Secretary. None of these was a local man and only the Ward Secretary



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spoke Nyamwezi. They conducted their official business in Swahili – Tanzania’s national language – and it was clear that the area was being drawn more fully than ever before into the nation as a whole. Coupled with this, even young children, who now compulsorily attended primary school, were much more fluent in Swahili than when I had left, as I discovered for myself on the first day of my revisit. A young boy stood in front of me and in impeccable Swahili told me that his grandfather, an old friend, wanted to see me whom he also flatteringly called his grandfather.

It is some of these developments, continuities and changes that I try to document in the main body of this book; and I do so in the hope that I can present not simply a more up-to-date account of the ‘condition’ of the people, but also one which will do justice to some of the things that matter to them as they go about their lives in their new nation. In saying this I am aware that my account is a selective and a partial one, especially in its tendency to concentrate on major social structural features and developments. This is not to deny the significance of such phenomena as religious and other customary beliefs and practices either in their own right or in the roles they play *vis-à-vis* social structure, and I do in fact discuss such practices and roles at various junctures in this book. But my emphasis is on social structure, and while this no doubt reflects something of myself it also, I believe, reflects some real features of the Nyamwezi situation. Firstly, it is not hard to see that social structure has been the most immediate focus of large-scale planned change in the area. Secondly, as my comments about the open and hospitable nature of Nyamwezi society to some extent imply, it can be argued that the people of the area are themselves in many ways more interested in social relationships than in culture as such for its own sake. Customs, values and ideas tend to be of special interest to them when they are seen to possess a direct relevance to their relationships with each other and the outside world. Living well together is of prime importance to them, and the fact that people of often quite diverse origins typically achieve this in the villages of the area, without stress on uniformity in all fields of custom, is no mean testimony to their will and skill in this regard. Again, in external relations, as I argue in my final chapter, it is not so much the details of local custom that matter – they are changing all the time – but its possession as a kind of resource which gives local people a legitimate and dignified identity in their dealings with the wider powers that be.

These considerations lead on to a further complex issue. A first

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glance at the title of this book might suggest (quite wrongly I hope) that it is just another 'tribal study', with all the faults of that rather old-fashioned genre. The concept of 'tribe' and the nature of such studies have been subjected to severe criticism by both anthropologists and others (cf. Southall, 1970) on a variety of grounds. 'Tribe' itself, for instance, has been said with much justification to be a term which has been used more readily of modern Africans than modern Europeans without proper thought to the comparability of 'regional particularism' in the two continents.<sup>1</sup> This point can be dealt with fairly easily by dropping the offending word and using terms like 'ethnic group' or, more simply, 'people'; and I have tried to do this in this book wherever possible. But the problem is not simply one of choice of words. The idea of 'tribal study', however it is titled, has been attacked on at least equally serious grounds as both politically divisive and epistemologically unsound, inasmuch as it tends to over-emphasise and rigidify a fundamentally fluid and contextually very variable phenomenon. Leaving aside the wilder forms such arguments have taken, it is of course patently true that ethnicity is a shifting and a delicate phenomenon, often – though by no means always – with important political implications; and it is no accident, for example, that the Tanzanian government decided not to ask any questions about ethnic group membership in its 1978 National Census. On the other hand it is equally clear that such groups and categories are far from wholly insubstantial and avoidance of due reference to them would appear to be mistaken also. My approach in the present work is basically to recognise but not exaggerate the fact that there are Nyamwezi Tanzanians, about whom I am moderately well informed, and to try to write about them and the area they mostly live in as sensibly and sensitively as I can. Here, and in my previously published work (cf. 1965, 1967a and b, 1970), I have paid a great deal of attention to the fact that Nyamwezi (Nyamwezi country) is not simply the area where Nyamwezi live, since many other people live there and share their lives with them, and many Nyamwezi live elsewhere. I have also tried to make it very clear that ethnic identity as such is rarely of great concern to them, compared for instance with living well together in local communities, and that they and their fellow villagers are very much aware how much they have in common with each other and how much their fates are intertwined in dealing with the outside world. In addition I have pointed out that neither the people nor their country constitute units with clearcut and unchanging boundaries. In working on this book I

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have been keenly conscious of the tension between trying to write simply and clearly and trying to do reasonable justice to the complex nature of such matters. I can only hope that I have not veered too far from either of these aims in the pursuit of the other.

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An anthropologist is especially dependent on the hospitality and co-operation of others during fieldwork. In this context I would especially like to thank my friends Julius Brush of Kahama, Nsabila Kitambi of Kakola, Professor and Mrs Ian Livingstone, Peter and Zebiya Rigby, Dr and Mrs Diekema, and the many villagers and others in Unyamwezi who received me back again, or for the first time, with the heart-warming hospitality for which the area is renowned. They are too many for me to name them all but I would particularly like to mention Ibuli, Hansini, Lukuliko, Mayebele, Mayige, Misana, Mtambuko, Muyeye, Ndulichimu and his wife Kamunde (who cooked regularly for me) and their many neighbours in Busangi, who had been my friends and mentors in 1957–60 and welcomed me back 'home' again in 1974. I would also like to thank the villagers of Wame

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and Kisuke for the generous hospitality they extended to me. Last within Tanzania, but in no sense least, I wish to take this opportunity to thank my friend and field assistant B. K. Kalugula for his invaluable help and the great pleasure of his company during my two lengthier stays in the area.

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My wife Eeva and my children have put up with a great deal to make this book possible, and I dedicate it to them in the hope that it is not too unworthy of the patience and forbearance they have shown.

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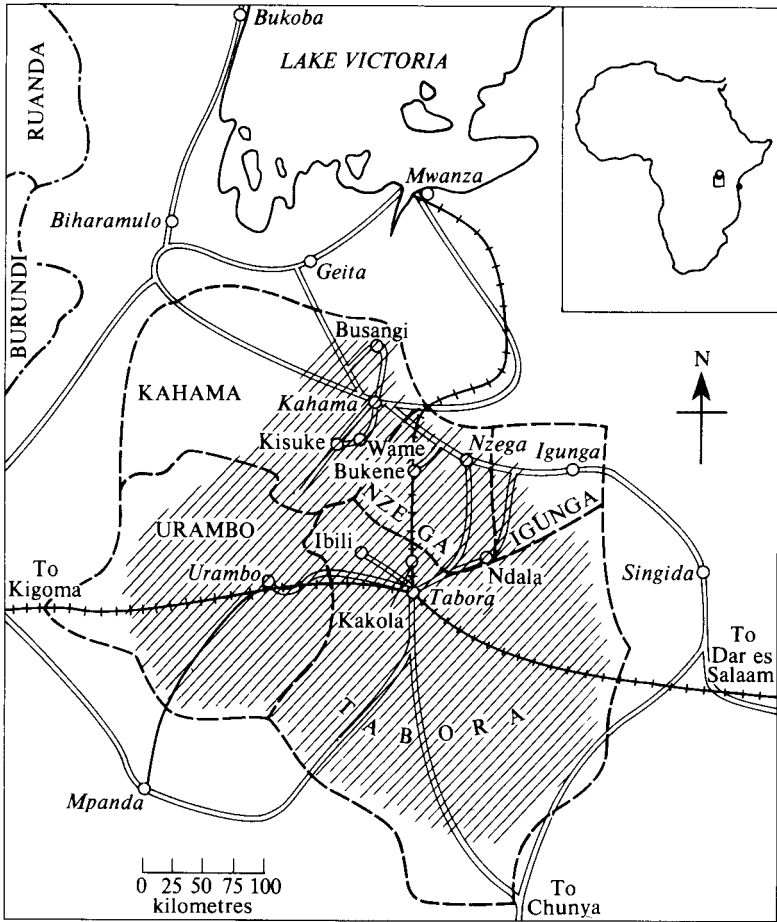
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Map of Nyamwezi area



*Key*

- KAHAMA** Administrative District
- Kahama* District Headquarters
- Busangi** Village and other settlements
- International Boundary
- - - Regional and District Boundaries
- ==== Roads
- ++++ Railways
- The Nyamwezi area