

Book Reviews

Good Company: A Study of Nyakyusa Age-Villages Monica Wilson, 1963

Michelle L. Maynor
Department of Anthropology
Wichita State University – Alpha of Kansas

Introduction

Godfrey and Monica Wilson studied the Nyakyusa in Africa between 1934 and 1938. Godfrey's purpose was to study the sociology of the people. Monica was commissioned by the International African Institute to study how the Christian missionaries were affecting the Nyakyusa. Both of them learned to speak the language. They were taught by their two informants, Leonard Mwaishumo a commoner and John Brown Mwaikambo a son of a chief.

The Nyakyusa are located in southern Tanzania and northern Malawi, in eastern Africa. The first known European contact was in 1875 by missionaries. Extreme isolation can be attributed to the geography of the land. At the time of their work, the Wilson's claimed that only 16% of the Nyakyusa were Christian. The rest were pagan and practiced polygyny.

Since villages consist of age-mates, it is possible to have brothers in other villages. The foundation of their culture is the relationships between contemporaries rather than family. Kinship is important for property inheritance. However the property is passed laterally from brother to brother until there are no more brothers left. Then property is passed to the eldest son of the eldest brother.

Women are extremely subordinate in this culture. Girls marry soon after puberty and belong to their husbands including all sexual rights. A woman can only assert herself to a brother and his sons. They hold no public role and because of this, there is very little written about them in this ethnography.

The following is sub-divided into the chapter titles of the book. Each chapter is briefly summarized before concluding remarks.

Village Organization

Boys between the ages of 6 and 11 sleep at their fathers house and herd his cattle for him. They herd with other boys around their age, approximately 5-10 other boys. This forms the basis of their lifelong relationships with one another. When a boy is around 10 or 11, he joins an age village which is right next to his father's village. At this time they begin maintaining their own crops and cease cattle herding for their father. Boys usually marry after the age of 25. After the most senior men have been married 8-10 years, there is a 'coming out' ceremony. The chief of their father's chiefdom splits the chiefdom in two. His two eldest son's are given half of the chiefdom. Also at this time village headmen are chosen for each age village. There are usually 4 villages on each side giving the new chief 4 villages. Each age village will then have 2 boy villages connected to them for the young and unmarried boys.

Economic Cooperation

The main cooperative activities within the village are protecting cattle from the 'raiders by day' and the 'witches by night'. Cultivating fields is the business of a man and his kin. It was shown that they have a loose reciprocal work approach among their kin and close friends. This is how it was traditionally done. However more and more often men are employed outside the village thus they are unable to contribute to the work within the village.

Values

The most important value that members of the Nyakyusa hold is that of ukwangala, or 'good company'. Discussions between equals or members of the age group are very important. This is how a man grows wise and learns cleanliness. They must eat together and invite friends and neighbors over for food and drink. This activity is reserved for the men only. The Wilson's discovered that while the pagan's stress the importance of feeding their neighbors, the Christians stress the importance of feeding strangers.

Another important value that has shaped tradition is the avoidance between a girl and her father-in-law. Once she is betrothed, she must avoid her father-in-law and not even make eye contact. It's believed that this stems from the incest taboo, so that a man will not seduce his son's wife.

Mystical Interdependence

As previously stated, the main cooperative activity within the village is protection against evil, which in this culture its witchcraft and the 'breath of men'. Witches are believed to have pythons in their belly. Christians and non-Nyakyusa suggest that these pythons are tape worms or enlarged kidneys or intestines. Witches are thought to be motivated by greed for meat and milk. The 'breath of men' is an entire group of people acting on an individual through the pythons of the witches. This can cause long term illness but not death.

Maintenance of Order

"Economic reciprocity and mystical interdependence are the foundation of order" (136). Respected friends can settle disputes as well as village headmen. Men frequently move out of their village to escape friction. There is evidence that disease is increasing within the villages therefore witch accusations are increasing which is leading to the movement of individuals. Ultimately, these men usually are asked back into the village.

Conclusion

Although I do not believe that nearly enough was discussed concerning the effect of the missionaries, the Wilson's believed a sense of urgency was required in recording this culture. They believed that Christianity was drastically changing the Nyakyusa culture and that it may disappear altogether. This ethnography was written in descriptive form with little analysis. In this manner the reader can be left to form their own conclusions without being polluted by the ethnographer's opinion. This book is a good introductory reading for anthropological and sociological students alike.