

Divinity or divinities? the religious role of ancestors in Nyakyusa belief

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Introduction

The main objective of this paper is to show that Monica Wilson's (1959) study of the Nyakyusa religion on Malawi's northern border with Tanzania challenges John Mbiti's reductionist assertion that monotheism, as the all-pervading idea in African religiosity, is the characteristic of African religion.¹ She has shown that explicit monotheism - the belief in one only God excluding all other gods explicitly - is a late comer, for it is in the context of ancestral spirits, nature spirits and impersonal forces, which are all secondary powers, that the belief in one God is implicitly asserted. She argues from the perspective of power relations that among the Nyakyusa, it is apparently difficult to find the idea of a single God in their religious thinking and practice. They have no developed concept of God comparable to that of the Nuer of Sudan. She concludes her deliberations by making the observation that the changing, or rather fluid, conception of the name Kyala, a mythical hero-founder among several others, has assumed the connotation of the single God under Christian influence. This conclusion is based mainly on her anthropological study of the Nyakyusa ritual processes which would seek neat, clear solutions to such a complex religious phenomena. It, therefore, runs the risk of simply being a projection of western rationalism imposed on the African apprehension of Divinity. However, the study has implications on the course of scholarship on Malawian religion which appears to be inclined to the reductionist model of the Mbiti type.

Belief in mystical powers

According to Monica Wilson's study, the Nyakyusa express their religion in ritu-

al rather than in dogma, but dogma is rather implicit than explicit. Its essential element is belief in mystical powers (*amanga*) resident in human beings, living or dead, in material objects or in certain actions. The elaborate rituals, which mark the critical moments of life, besides confirming or affirming the kinship group's unity, are a means of seeking salvation. They aim at securing the benefits of mystical power, primarily: fertility in the home, herd and field. Any attitude to or in connection with the Supreme Being the Nyakyusa may have is of a confused amalgam of dead heroes and other ancestors or shades, who are indeed principles of vitality at times, but may be dangerous and demanding. This observation may support Okot p'Bitek's contention that "not only the character of the divine but also the question of the very existence of a concept of God must be left open rather than taken for granted".²

In Nyakyusa religion, ritual which linked together the different tribal groupings constituted the charter for chieftainship and justified the political and social roles of the autochthonous commoner populations who are accredited with witchcraft in their beliefs. The divinities were god-like brothers, Nkekete, Kyala, Lwembe and Mbasi, who had come from Ukinga bringing fire, metal-working, new crops and, in some myths, the ability to model cattle in clay and breathe life into them. Lwembe and Kyungu - the heroic ancestors of the Ngonde, a people belonging to the same linguistic and cultural family as the Nyakyusa - had living representatives who lived in secret seclusion surrounded by taboos, and were not allowed to die a natural death (Mair 1959: 263; Kalinga 1974). They represented in their persons the principle of growth, and this could not be allowed to fail in the chief, or all his people would sicken and die. Thus imminent and immanent spiritual forces were honoured by the Nyakyusa. The heroic ancestors are accredited with the power of creation. Kyala created crops alone and rose again when his father or elder brother tried to kill him. Lwembe created both crops and animals while Kyungu had the miraculous power of creating huge animals. As creators, the heroes and the shades are closely identified. Hence the expression: "Kyala creates desire, the 'shades' rouses up in the belly when a woman conceives." The shade, represented by the seed, is the principle of life, while the hero embodied a vital force which caused the grain to sprout. As the heroes are believed to dwell beneath with the shades, the concept of a sky-god is absent and the culture-heroes mortality is affirmed. Furthermore, the name Kyala is fluid as it may connote differentiation in social relationships, e.g. a chief to a commoner, a father to his son or daughter, a shade to his living kinsman.³ One may be called Kyala after performing an outstanding feat.

The Nyakyusa, like many other African traditional religions, concerned themselves little with creation and the creator in the abstract. Relationships were centred around other living men and the shades, and not on the high God - (Kyala). This is manifest in the celebration of rituals of kinship and communal rituals, none of which was directed to the single God. The rituals of kinship directed to the shades became necessary in order to appease angered shades. Communal rituals directed to the heroic ancestors, were occasioned by bickerings between chieftains and priests or village headmen which in turn disturbed the natural order. As the heroes were identified with fertility and prosperity, a failure in nature in these respects was taken to be a demonstration of heroic displeasure. Reconciliation had to be sought through the communal rituals. Ritual centres with a type of priesthood devoted to the cult of the ancestor heroes and dead chiefs developed. Chiefs who were nearly related prayed together at the groves of their common ancestors and those more distantly connected joined in sacrifice to their founding fathers. The necessity of cooperation in sacrifice to their founding fathers had the effect of compelling rival factions to be reconciled, thus supporting the political and kinship structure of the Nyakyusa. Notably, the ancestral sacrifices offered to appease the ancestors and satisfy their demands, sought as well to secure the people's identification with them (Wright 1972:158-159). Monica Wilson also observed that constant reference was made to the shades, witches and the 'breath of men'. Good and evil were always thought to be active and persuasive. The criminal manipulation of evil through witchcraft and sorcery was believed to be common. The heroes, shades, and many men of power had the ambivalent role of maintaining order in the universe.

Divinity or divinities?

Hence, from Monica Wilson's account of the Nyakyusa pre-Christian religion, the concept of the high God is difficult to gauge. Any conception of the high God they might have had is confused, if not eclipsed, by the semi-divine heroic ancestors and other shades. These dominate the Nyakyusa rituals and sacrifices, and some of them have living descendants. Although much of the same material may lead one to opt for Kyala as an overriding power to which the shades, witches and medicines are subject, the process of change of ideas and values among the Nyakyusa had already begun with the advent of Christianity at the close of the 19th century. When Monica Wilson studied the Nyakyusa in the 1930s, the name Kyala was already being singled out to accommodate the Christian concept of the high God. The fluidity of the name Kyala, its lack of association with the living chiefs as

happened with the other heroes and its immaterial character might have attracted the early missionaries to it as the nearest choice for denoting the high God. The same supposition has been advanced for the adoption of the name Mulungu for the High God by early missionaries in Malawi and elsewhere in East Africa (Chakanza 1987 : 4-8). According to Marcia Wright (1959), the cult of Kyala had already been undergoing a transformation around the middle of the nineteenth century. A new hereditary professional priesthood was founded at Pali Kyala - Kyala's shrine. Hence Pali Kyala survived as a territorial shrine and served an eminently multi-tribal constituency. As the immanence of Kyala faded, his remoteness became the meeting point with the missionary conception of God. Thus, while Monica Wilson stressed external influence - (i.e. Christianity) for the present-day Nyakyusa monotheism, Wright pointed to the internal factors, i.e. restructuring of the Kyala cult.⁴ The more cosmopolitan a deity is, the more abstract he becomes. It can be suggested, therefore, that the Nyakyusa cult could have already started the process of developing towards monotheism before the coming of Christianity as Kyala superseded the local deities, becoming transcendent and more abstract.

With regard to ancestor veneration which is at the centre of Nyakyusa religion, it is worth noting that it is not practised by all African peoples.⁵ Ancestor veneration occupies a place of varying importance in the scheme of religious belief and ritual, and there are different emphases placed on the role of ancestral spirits in human life and on their descendants. Among the Nyakyusa, ancestors remain united in affection and mutual obligations with the living. The 'divine kings' are their visible representatives. Indeed, ancestors figure so prominently in the region of spirit world that they create an ancestral cult, and obscure the spirit beings or "Being" before whom they otherwise serve as mediators between the transcendent and the human (Turner 1977: 32). The ancestor cult provides for the Nyakyusa an institutionalized scheme of beliefs and practices by means of which they accept some kind of responsibility for what happens to them and yet feel free of blame for failure to control the vicissitudes of life (Fortes 1959:61). Among the Nyakyusa, as among the Tallensi of Ghana, the ancestor cult defines a person's place in society and his rights, duties, capacities and privileges. Furthermore, the cult transposes filial piety to a superabundance order by ritualizing it. The chiefs' groves and other ritual centres formed points of contact with the ancestors through the sacrifices offered. Ancestors are continually involved in the affairs of the living as the myths have indicated. They manifest their interest characteristically in unforeseeable events which are contrary to people's normal expectations. In this way they make their will known and elicit submission. The religious norms and values on which

the social order rests are enforced. Like the Lugbara religion (Middleton 1960) and many other African religions, Nyakyusa religion is concerned essentially with the relationship between the living and the dead. Its most important rite is that of sacrifice made to the spirits of the dead who are thought to be angered by wrong actions of their living descendants and to have shown their anger by sending sickness. After the source of a particular case of sickness has been revealed by divination, sacrifices followed.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, Monica Wilson has analyzed Nyakyusa religion in connection with political office and other matters of wider public importance. The contents range from the mythological pseudo-historical charter of the people and its practical application in the institutional complex of the divine kings to the period of contact with the West. The Nyakyusa religion is on the whole one of fear and guilt. The dominant role of the semi-divine heroes obscures any monotheistic trend generally noted in many African religions. Wilson attributes the change towards monotheism to the influence of Christianity. However, Marcia Wright's research on the earlier political and religious history of the Nyakyusa has shown that the transformation process towards monotheism had already started before the coming of Christianity. A more plausible approach would be to recognize both the internal and external factors in the transformation of the Nyakyusa cults, and any other cult for that matter.

The role of ancestors is seen as both separating men from malign powers as well as enforcing the norms of the social structure and by this means, maintaining their bond with the living.

Notes

1. This reductionist approach is clearly reflected in E.W. Smith (ed.) *African Ideas of God* and J.S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*.
2. Okot p'Bitek's statement in *African Religious Research*, (African Studies Centre, University of California) Vol. 4. No. 2 (November, 1974), 7. He goes on to say "the veneration of a spirit did not imply a belief in God with a capital 'G'; the existence of a story of how things began did not necessarily imply a Cre-

- ator with capital 'C'. See also Okot p'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (East African Literature Bureau, 1971).
3. For an early simplistic view of the name Kyala, see D.R. Mackenzie, *The Spirit-ridden Konde* (London, 1925).
 4. Wright reviews M. Wilson's account of the Nyakyusa by giving an earlier historical context in which the Nyakyusa society underwent change - both social and political, so that the heroic traditional ancestors and the cults underwent some transformation. Wright tries to show a kind of continuity within the transformation of the Nyakyusa religion. "Kyala" becomes a regional deity to whom all the chiefs must have recourse despite their own smaller deities of their chiefdoms.
 5. The Nilotic Nuer and Dinka do not have the practice, except insofar as the souls of those struck by lightning are regarded by them as divinities. See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*. p 316. For the Dinka, consult G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*.

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