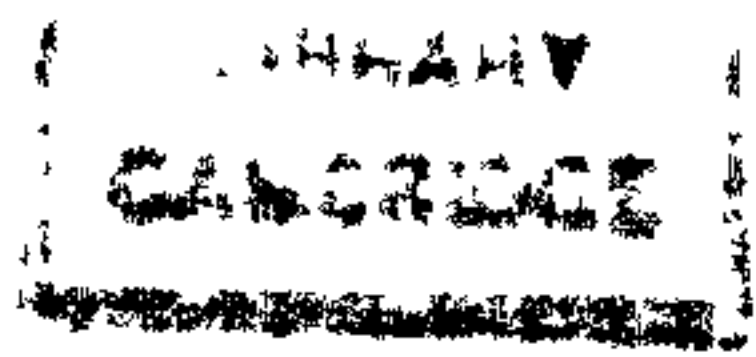


THE YAO MUSLIMS

Religion and Social Change in  
Southern Malawi



by

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## The Yao Muslims: Religion and Social Change in Southern Malawi

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The African Muslim minority in Malawi has been identified with one particular linguistic group, the Yao. The dissertation begins with the problem of their conversion and adherence to Islam in the face of seemingly adverse circumstances. In exploring solutions to this problem the emergence of a Yao identity is outlined and the politics of conversion are described. The narrative then moves on to the transformations of the Yao Muslims in the hundred years since their conversion. A model of religious change is developed that attempts to account for both the dynamics of change and the contemporary situation of Islam in southern Malawi. The Yao Muslims are shown to be divided into three competing and sometimes hostile factions that are termed the Sufis, the *sukuti* or 'quietist' movement and the new reformists. The appearance of these movements and their interaction with one another is described in relation to the questions of identity and religious practice. The model proposes a three phase scheme of Islamic change (appropriation and accommodation followed by internal reform and then the new reformist movement) that is defined in part by the relationship of the Yao Muslims to writing and the Book. It is suggested that a certain logic of transformation is endogenous to Islam as a religion of the Book and that the scripturalist tendencies of the reformist movement give it an advantage over the followers of Sufi practices, especially in the context of modern systems of communication and education. The general approach is that of an historical anthropology, linking notions of structured change to anthropological concerns with ritual and practice. The analysis concludes by raising questions about the nature of religious change in the context of an increasingly volatile world system and the place of the anthropology of religion in the understanding of modernity.

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## PREFACE

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When I began to write this thesis almost eight years ago the world seemed very dark. I had just been discharged from a psychiatric hospital after treatment for clinical depression and was fluctuating between bursts of frenetic activity and states of terrified inertia. South Africa, my home land, was gripped by the death throes of the apartheid regime and it seemed that the government was determined to exact a terrible price before relinquishing their hold on power. Malawi, where I had done my fieldwork, was being slowly strangled by the government of Dr Hastings Banda and there was every indication that worse was to follow as a consequence of the sinister alliance that was emerging between factions of the ruling Malawi Congress Party and the Renamo movement in Mozambique. Whichever way I looked the future appeared to terminate in a nightmare. The great powers of the world were in the hands of people that I considered to be selfish, short-sighted and unscrupulous. It was the era of Reagan and Thatcher and of the final exposure of the fraudulent communist regimes. Nowhere could I discern even a glimmer of hope.

Now as I put the finishing touches to this work I am filled with optimism. Everything has changed. I participated in the first democratic election in my country and share the happy wonder of most South Africans at the possibilities that have emerged in the new dispensation. Malawi too had its elections and Dr Banda and his henchmen were peacefully removed from power. Even in Mozambique and Angola there are signs of a new beginning and of a chance for all of us in southern Africa to move beyond the endless cycle of violence and despair. It would of course be quite naive to believe that suddenly all the problems of the sub-continent have been solved and that the rest of the world need simply look to southern Africa to find the solution to their ills. There are very formidable obstacles that lie ahead for us and the horrors of Rwanda are a timely reminder of what mistaken choices can lead to. I am however convinced that the events in South Africa have opened up an avenue, a way beyond the impasse of modernity, that we can choose to move through or not.

On a personal level there have also been remarkable changes. From a position of almost complete powerlessness and despondency where I felt entirely at the mercy of huge and sinister forces I have moved into a situation where I am actively engaged in a social experiment that has a potential of transformation way beyond southern Africa. Since my return to South Africa three years ago I have become increasingly aware that we really now do have the



ability to intervene as individuals in history. For me and the many other South Africans who believed that our destiny was beyond our control there has been the discovery that we do each have a chance to influence history. We are learning quickly that reconciliation and the programme of reconstruction and development has to begin at the level of interactions among individuals for it to be successful. My thesis is about change, and in the writing of it I have been transformed in a way that I could never have predicted. I began with a notion of exploring the inexorable forces that shape our lives and have ended with the realisation that there come moments perhaps in each generation when things can be turned around. Individual and collective redemption is within our reach, and the structures of hatred and fear can be dissolved by an economy of care. If it may be said that the mystery of love and community lies at the heart of religion then the anthropology of religion can make a significant contribution to the new world.

This thesis has been produced with great difficulty, and it has been possible for me to bring it to completion only by enlisting help from many sources. My thanks go to the many people in Malawi who made my fieldwork possible in the face of the adverse circumstances that are detailed in Chapter 2. I am grateful in particular to David and Isobel Bone for their help and hospitality in Zomba, and for David's generosity in sharing his vast knowledge of Islam in Malawi. My thanks are also due to Louis Msukwa for helping

me to get permission to do research in Malawi and for arranging an affiliation with the Centre for Social Research in Zomba for me. Several expatriate members of volunteer organisations based in Mangochi and Malindi provided hospitality and support, and I would like to record my gratitude to Kelly Cutschall, Reiko Futamatsu, Jenny Goulding, Noirín O'Sullivan, John Herbst, Lexa Lawrence and Yachiyo Sato. I am indebted to Richard Waller and Doreen Jones who helped me at an especially difficult time. My greatest debt is to the people in various parts of Mangochi district who permitted my intrusion into their lives; in particular I would like to thank Frank Amosi, Chambo Nkata, Abubaker Ajasi, Rocard Mustahab, Ibrahim Benesi, Abdul Kader Lehman, Jonathan Mataula, Melika Sumani and Salum Kanyenda.

To my teachers and other scholars at Cape Town, Cambridge and elsewhere who have encouraged my erratic pursuit of anthropological knowledge I owe a special thanks. I would like to record my appreciation of Robert Thornton, John Sharp, Peter Skalnik, Gerhard Kubik, Mary Kendall, John Iliffe, Jaap van Velsen, Megan Vaughan, Clyde Mitchell, Louis Brenner and above all my patient supervisor Ray Abrahams. Ruth van Velsen has been the kind of friend that anyone who tries to complete a thesis needs most. My family has had to suffer many anxious moments in the course of my fieldwork and protracted writing. It has not been easy for them to understand what this project has been about but they have helped and supported me as best they could. My



mother died without seeing the end of it, but her conviction that one should persist in something that is important has kept me from abandoning the thesis at times of despair. My father and siblings have helped me in many ways over the years and I thank them. To my wife any word of thanks would be entirely inadequate. Her presence is inscribed throughout these pages, and indeed it was her support - material as well as moral - that gave me the platform without which this document could never have been completed. The birth of my daughter has given my work a light and purpose that I could not previously have imagined, and it is to her and to all the children of southern Africa that I dedicate this essay on change. God bless Africa.

I am extremely grateful for financial assistance from the following sources: The Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, the Harry Crossley Bursary, the Mushet Education Trust, the Cambridge Chancellor's Overseas Student Bursary, the Overseas Research Student Award, the Richards Fund, the Smuts Memorial Fund, the Crowther-Beynon Fund and a Bartle Frere Exhibition.

It has been my intention to write in a style that is as accessible and straightforward as possible. I have therefore adopted an approach to orthography that is consistent only in the criteria of simplicity and readability. Where current conventions of spelling conform to this I have used them, but where they seem overly

complicated or burdened with diacritical signs I have preferred older and more straightforward forms. In rendering Arabic terms I have avoided diacritics altogether and used Anglicised plural forms (e.g. *tariqas* instead of *turuq* as the plural form of a Sufi order). In my transcription of Chiyao I have tended to favour simplicity and uniformity over accuracy. Chiyao makes no distinction between the sounds that are represented in English by *l* and *r*, so I have chosen *l* throughout for the sake of consistency (e.g. *Makanjila* instead of *Makanjira*). I use the longer spellings where they are closer to the usual English forms (e.g. *ch* rather than the *c* that is used by some linguists for the first consonant in a word like Chiyao). My experience of language use is that it is in any case very fluid and heterogeneous and thus not something to be pedantic about.

This thesis does not exceed 80 000 words in length and is the result of my own work, including nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration.

# PART ONE

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## SITUATING THE STUDY

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## 1

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## THE PROBLEM

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Before setting off to do fieldwork in Malawi I formulated several questions that seemed worth investigating, all directed towards an understanding of the influence of Islam on the Yao and grouped into three general areas of inquiry. First, the characteristics of Islamic practice and organisation among the Yao. Second, religious leadership of the Yao Muslims - the agents of the propagation of Islam in the region, and those responsible for its maintenance or transformation. And third, the consequences of conversion to Islam for the Yao in the light of their position as a Muslim minority in Malawi. Behind these tentatively formulated paths of inquiry was a more fundamental problem that arose from my reading of the literature on the Yao. Time and again the 'depth' of Islam among the Yao was called into question, initially by Christian missionaries and later by ethnographers and Islamicists, as well as by Muslim reformers. A typical, if vehement, statement of the opinion of the missionaries working among the Yao at the



turn of the century is the following one by Chauncy Maples, a member of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), in *The Nyasa News* of 1893:

There can be no greater mistake made about a Yao chief than to suppose that because he calls himself a Mohammedan and entertains a *mwali* [Muslim teacher] in his town, he is really a believer in Islam and a true follower of the prophet of that creed. It is not too much to say that Islam, as a devout Mohammedan understands the term, is a creed unknown to the Yao people, because a creed, that as such, has never really been preached to them. Whatever merits Islam as a religion may have, we do not hesitate to say that this spurious, so-called Islam, that has penetrated to Nyasaland, has, considered from the point of view of morals, brought about a worse state of things than that of the heathenism it has in some cases displaced and supplanted.<sup>1</sup>

The missionaries, of course, were hardly disinterested observers of the situation, but in fact the opinions of later, less partial writers do not diverge much from that early assessment of Maples. In his survey of Islamic law in Africa, Anderson makes the following observation: "The religion of Islam is today making little or no progress in the country [Nyasaland] and even among the Yao appears to be generally only skin-deep.... Certainly there is little in the moral or social condition of the Yao to recommend Islam to the Protectorate as a whole." (1954: 170). Trimingham, in his history of Islam in East Africa, concludes: "Although Islam is a distinguishing characteristic of the Yao we have affirmed that it does not

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<sup>1</sup>*The Nyasa News* (2), November 1893, 50.



go very deep." (1964: 151). And Clyde Mitchell makes the point thus: "In the area I visited, nearly all Yao professed to be Moslems. A certain proportion of those who claimed to be Moslems could not be so, even by their own standards." (1951: 345).

In a sense, this question of the 'depth' of Islam is ultimately a theological issue - who, after all, is the final arbiter in these matters? But it also poses a problem which, from a sociological point of view, was the puzzle which animated my research. It can be stated as follows: If the Yao have acquired only some superficial trappings of Islamic belief and practice, merely a veneer that has had little influence on them, then why does Islam appear to have such a tenacious hold over them? Why does it appear to be a 'distinguishing characteristic' of the Yao, and how has it come about that, as the historian Edward Alpers (1972a: 174) puts it, "the Yao have been pre-eminently identified as a people for whom Islam is synonymous with being Yao."?

This conundrum becomes all the more puzzling considering the apparently adverse consequences for the Yao of adherence to Islam. The Christian missionaries were in no doubt of the detrimental effects of Islam on the Yao. A contribution to a mission journal stated the general view bluntly: "Whatever Mohammedanism may be elsewhere, in Nyasaland it is an almost wholly debasing influence."<sup>1</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup>H.A.Machell Cox: 'A Debasing Influence' *Central Africa*, April 1909, 96-97.

conclusion appears to have been based mainly on the perceived failure of Islam to "raise the condition, or improve the morality of the heathen." But the resistance of Muslim converts to the education provided by the missions was also a matter of concern, and in the long term this had serious consequences for the Yao. One historian traces the crisis that rocked the government of the newly independent state of Malawi in 1964 back in part to this lack of access to education: "the rejection of missionary influences by the Yao chiefs of the area from 1875, the increasing involvement with Islam, even perhaps the failure of the government in the late 1920s to find suitable Muslim teachers for their schools, all contributed to the political crisis of the immediate post-independence period." (McCracken, 1968: 208). The dispute in 1964 between the Prime Minister (later 'President for Life'), Dr Banda, and members of his cabinet, resulted in one of their number, Henry Chipembere, leading an insurrection from his predominantly Yao home district.<sup>1</sup> The failure of this attempt to displace Dr Banda's regime, which remained in control of Malawi until 1994, certainly did not improve the position of the Yao minority in the post-independence era.

This turn of events could hardly have been anticipated by the Yao converts to Islam at the turn of the century, but it is nonetheless curious that mass conversion to Islam occurred at the very time that the involvement of the Yao in the slave trade with the East African coast was being

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<sup>1</sup>Accounts of the 1964 crisis and the fate of Chipembere's uprising may be found in Rotberg (1966: 317-321) and Pike (1968: 167-169).



terminated by the British, and the obvious material incentive - that of consolidating links with Muslim trading partners - was removed. Certainly, from the outset of their serious involvement with Islam, there does not appear to have been any great material or - from the point of view of the missionaries - moral advantage to encourage the Yao in their commitment to Islam. On the other hand, after the initial blow, the British defeat of the Yao chiefs and the consequent end of the lucrative trade in ivory and slaves, the fortunes of the Yao Muslims in the early years of the Nyasaland Protectorate were not entirely bleak.

The Yao had often been favourably compared - by missionaries, settlers and colonial officials - with other tribes in southern Nyasaland. The debate about the 'Yao question' recorded in the pages of *The Nyasa News* in the 1890s, reveals clearly the attitude of the missionaries. Despite their concern about the deep involvement of the Yao in the slave trade, they had great hopes of overcoming what they saw as a superficial and detrimental coastal influence, and finding in the Yao their most promising allies in the mission to bring Christianity and civilisation to the region: "We see in the Yao race, ground, exceptionally fertile and productive, for the seed we missionaries come sowing." And noting the experience of the missionaries in Zanzibar, "that the Yaos on the whole, best repay the care and pains bestowed on their education and moral training; and at the present time we believe it is to the Yaos that the authorities there are inclined to

look, rather than to any other one tribe, for future developments in the way of a native ministry in the native church."<sup>1</sup>

With a few notable exceptions, the Yao in Nyasaland did not fulfil the hopes of the missionaries, but after the defeat of the chiefs by the British forces, they were quick to seize the opportunities that opened up to them under the *pax Britannica*, as the *British Central Africa Gazette* reported: "The Yao seem to be taking heartily now to service in the Armed Forces of the Protectorate - a change as sudden and remarkable as may be seen amongst the border tribes of India, where the enemies of yesterday become the disciplined troops of the Imperial power today."<sup>2</sup> Their reputation as a strong and warlike tribe was to stand the Yao in good stead in these early years of the Protectorate. Alexander Hetherwick, the Church of Scotland missionary, sums up their situation thus:

The Yaos of British Central Africa proved themselves at first bitterly hostile to the British Administration on its establishment in 1891.... These [hostilities] have in great measure been overcome, and the Yao people - a race physically and intellectually the most powerful in East Central Africa - have given various tokens of their acceptance of the rule of a civilised power. Numbers of the tribe have entered the service of the Administration as interpreters, policemen, etc., while a large proportion of the soldiers belonging to the native regiment have been enrolled from that tribe. (Hetherwick, 1902: vi-vii).

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<sup>1</sup>The Nyasa News (2), November 1893, 62.

<sup>2</sup>BCAG 3(2), 15 January 1896, 1.



The fact that Islam was spreading rapidly among the Yao at this time did not appear to prejudice the government against them. Indeed, another missionary complained that one of the factors contributing to the spread of Islam in Nyasaland was the preference of the government for Muslim Yao *askari* and servants (Hofmeyr, 1912: 6). The policy of the Nyasaland government in the first decades of this century was in general, as Greenstein (1975: 153-4) found, one of religious neutrality.

The events of 1915 which became known as the Chilembwe rising, an outbreak of violence in the Shire Highlands which left three white planters dead, were to some extent a windfall for the Yao Muslims. Although Chilembwe was a Yao, he was a Christian, and very few of his followers in the Providence Industrial Mission were Yao.<sup>1</sup> The Muslims in the area were quick to distance themselves from the actions of Chilembwe and his followers, and even assisted in the apprehension of suspects. This, and the desire of the British authorities to implement the system of indirect rule provided for by the 1912 District Administration (Native) Ordinance, gave the local Muslims a distinct advantage in the aftermath of the Rising. As White puts it: "One aspect of the imposition of indirect rule in the Shire highlands between 1915 and 1930 was, quite clearly, an alliance with Islam." (1984: 533). The suspicion of the

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<sup>1</sup>Chilembwe's mother seems to have been a Mang'anja slave, but his father was a Yao, and he looked upon himself as a Yao (Shepperson and Price, 1958: 42-49).



authorities towards the educated Africans produced by the missions, which was one of the consequences of the rising, left the apparently conservative Yao Muslims as the beneficiaries in the years which followed.

On balance it would seem that in the years following their conversion to Islam, it was not a great hindrance to the Yao in Nyasaland, and in some ways an advantage. Their general conditions of living were comparatively good for the region, as Mitchell pointed out: "On the whole, those who are competent to make comparative judgements maintain that the Yao live on a fairly high standard of living for Central Africans." (1951: 304). But it is clear that although some of them were sufficiently pragmatic in defeat to find themselves a niche in the colonial regime, in the armed forces and as the favoured agents of indirect rule in predominantly Yao districts of the Protectorate, this was achieved at the cost of exclusion from the sort of education which was becoming increasingly a prerequisite for advancement in the developing political economy.

In summary, the fortunes of the Yao Muslims would seem to have deteriorated sharply with the defeat of their chiefs and the ending of the slave trade by the British, improved somewhat in the first decades of the Protectorate, and even more, particularly for chiefs and headmen, with the imposition of indirect rule after 1915, and then deteriorated again with the growth of African nationalism and the emergence of an independent Malawi. Many of my

elderly Yao informants looked back on British rule with some nostalgia, and one of the first surprises of my stay in Malawi was an eruption of applause that took place when, during an open-air film show in Mangochi, Queen Elizabeth II appeared in a documentary.

The point that I have attempted to illustrate with this survey of some of the consequences of conversion to Islam for the Yao, is that although there were no severe pressures for them to abandon Islam, such material advantages as there were to be gained from it were limited and uncertain. It seemed then, that in order to find some sort of solution to the problem I had posed, I would need to look for the attractions of Islam for the Yao in something more than a simple materialistic equation of advantage. If, as had been repeatedly asserted, Islam was merely a veneer, lacking any profound influence on the Yao, then its hold on them required an explanation which went beyond a reductionist account of the instrumentality of religion.

These then were the sources of my problem - the perceptions of the superficial but often detrimental influence of Islam on the Yao - and my research was informed by the desire to make sense of the paradox to which these assessments gave rise. From the point of view of the Yao, to anticipate my argument a little, Islam may have penetrated a little more deeply than observers for whom the standard of comparison was a theoretical model of Islamic orthodoxy might have

realised. And the advantages of adherence to Islam could have appeared somewhat differently to the Yao, and have been calculated on other criteria to those of missionaries or historians. But above all, it may be a mistake to see Islam as something which can be adopted or discarded at will, to suit changing social or economic conditions. There is a long tradition in the sociology of religion, deriving mainly from Durkheim and Marx, to seek explanations for religion in the ways it is supposed to reflect or disguise social or economic formations. It could be, though, that the solution to my problem was to be found in the nature of the religion itself, rather than in its dependence on other social changes.



## 2

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## FIELDWORK

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'Very well. Go on. Only no details, pray. Spare me the details.' [Sir Ethelred in *The Secret Agent* ]

Joseph Conrad

In the methodological discussion at the beginning of *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, Malinowski advocates a full and candid description of the conditions of research: "In Ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the full searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts but produce them before us out of complete obscurity." (1922: 3). He proceeds with a "brief outline of an Ethnographer's tribulations", conjuring up a picture of his arrival, "alone on a tropical beach close to a native village", and recalling his feelings of despair after "many obstinate but futile attempts had entirely failed to bring me into real touch with the natives, or supplied me with any material." (Ibid.: 4). But it was not long before he began to make

headway, and "found out where lay the secret of effective field-work." (Ibid.: 6). He goes on to give an account of his fieldwork methods which is certainly more prescriptive than descriptive, as Stocking has demonstrated (1983: 109), and much has been made of the gap between these ideals and the intimate record of his fieldwork experiences in his diaries.<sup>1</sup>

Few ethnographers would wish to emulate Malinowski's involuntary exposure of his fieldwork diaries to public scrutiny, but there is a case to be made for a more explicit location of the 'ethnographer's tribulations' in the ethnography itself. Leach, taking stock of the state of 'tribal ethnography', concludes: "Ethnographers must admit the reflexivity of their activities; they must become autobiographical." (1987: 12). He is concerned particularly with the distortions or fictions which result from the ethnographic treatment of societies as though they exist outside a history in which the ethnographer plays a part: "Among the evidence that is thus omitted are nearly all references to the cultural background of the ethnographer him(her)self. Yet there are many situations, both in the distant and recent past, in which the ethnographer's personal 'cargo' must have had drastic repercussions. As anthropologists we need to pay closer attention to such distortions." (Ibid.: 2). It is possible to go too far in this direction, of course. I'm not sure that it is useful

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<sup>1</sup>Raymond Firth's (1988) appreciation of Malinowski is a gentle corrective to some of the criticism which the publication of the diaries elicited.

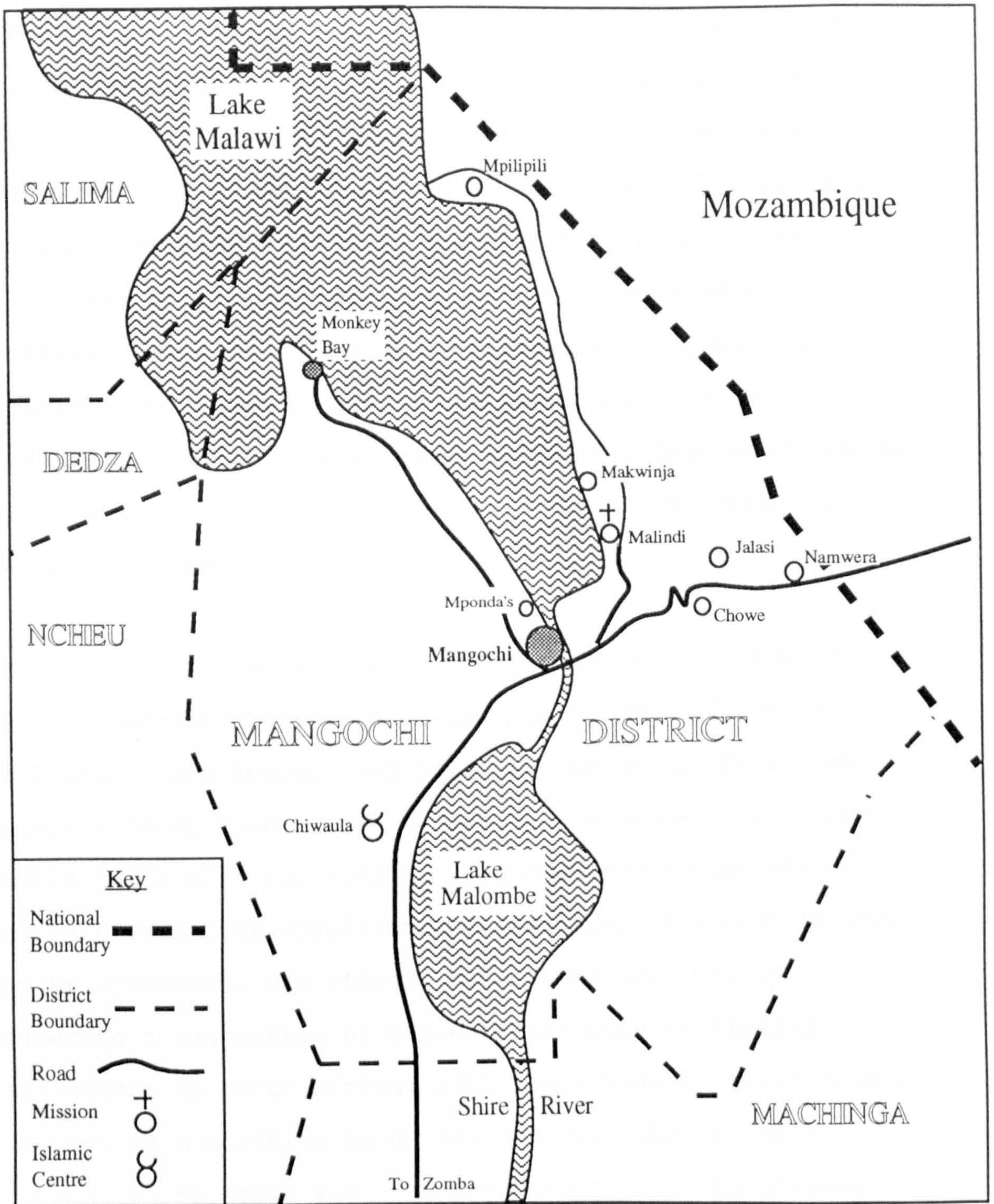


for the ethnographer to feature as an intrusive presence in an ethnography, and reflection on the problems of fieldwork can become self-indulgent. But the circumstances of my own fieldwork make it imperative that I give particular consideration to the issues which Leach has raised.

My stay in Malawi can be divided quite neatly into two parts. From my own point of view, the first eight months were productive and sometimes enjoyable; the rest were nearly catastrophic. I arrived in Malawi at the beginning of October 1985, and the last entry to my field-notes was made at Makanjila on 24 May 1986. I will give some account of what followed, and its implications for this work, but will deal first with the more positive aspects of my fieldwork.

The first couple of weeks I stayed in Zomba, the town in the Shire Highlands of southern Malawi where Chancellor College, the main campus of the University of Malawi, is situated. There I became affiliated to the Centre for Social Research, through which I obtained permission from the government to do fieldwork in Mangochi District. While in Zomba I began work on learning to speak the Yao language. My teacher was a Yao-speaking Christian from a nearby village, and in his company I had my first introduction to a Yao village outside the pages of Clyde Mitchell's ethnography. Before leaving for Mangochi District, I went to Blantyre to introduce myself to officials of the Muslim Association of Malawi.





Map 1: Mangochi District

0 10 20 30 kms



My choice of Mangochi District as the area on which I would focus my research was influenced both by my reading of the literature before I left for the field, and by the advice of scholars familiar with Malawi. Located at the southern tip of Lake Malawi, it has a high concentration of Yao Muslims, and is closely associated with the history of Islam in Malawi. In the course of the fieldwork I was based at three different sites in the district. First at Mangochi town, the administrative headquarters or *boma* of the district. Then at a lakeshore village near the Malindi mission, on the east side of the Lake, and finally Mpilipili, the village of chief Makanjila, further north on the eastern shore, near the point at which the border with Mozambique meets the Lake.

In general the people I encountered during my fieldwork, from government officials to the inhabitants of remote villages, were helpful and friendly. There had been some anxiety in my mind before my arrival in Malawi that, as a white South African, I might have been confronted with a certain amount of suspicion and hostility, but this proved to be unfounded. One effect that it did have was to generate a succession of requests for help in finding employment in South Africa, although I made it clear that I was not in a position to do so. The fact that I was attempting to learn Yao - rather than Chewa, the official language and the one that expatriates are usually encouraged to learn - caused a great deal of surprise and interest wherever I went in the Yao districts. This, along



with my interest in Islam, tended to set me apart from other expatriates and officials entering the district, and since it has been the experience of Yao Muslims over the years for outsiders, with a few exceptions, to be uninterested in or indeed to discourage their language and their religion, the curiosity aroused by my interest in these gave me a useful point of access.

The duration of my fieldwork was punctuated by a series of illnesses. The first, a severe and protracted bout of diarrhoea, afflicted me soon after I had moved into the council rest-house in Mangochi. Although the rest-house was situated conveniently close to the market and the mosque, and while based there I had met several people who proved to be among my most useful informants, concern about my health led me to accept an invitation to share the house of a couple of teachers at the Mangochi Secondary School. There were advantages and disadvantages to this arrangement. The teachers were both expatriate volunteers, and their house was situated in the grounds of the school, somewhat removed from the centre of the town. But having a secure and relatively comfortable base from which to work enabled me to settle into the district a great deal more easily than might otherwise have been the case. Most importantly, though, living next to the school allowed me to become directly involved in its activities, and to collect information on education which was crucial for my understanding of the current developments in Islam in the region.

My association with the school was rewarding in another way. Shortly after moving in, I was asked to help with the teaching of mathematics while a replacement was found for a teacher who had left the school. I did this for a term, and in retrospect, it seems to me one of the more worthwhile aspects of my fieldwork. The question of the sort of return the ethnographer makes to those who make the work possible had been of some concern to me and, while there may be all sorts of ways that ethnography can justify itself, for the people whose lives happen to be the subject of ethnography there often seems little in the way of tangible benefit to be derived from it. Teaching gave me the opportunity to make some contribution which, from the evident enthusiasm of the pupils, I felt to be of value. It also, of course, gave me some first-hand experience of the problems of formal education as they affect people in the district, and enabled me to become involved with the activities of the local Muslim Students Association. The relationships which I formed with certain individuals at the school were the ones I valued most, both in themselves and in terms of my research. They are also the ones which have outlasted fieldwork.

Apart from my involvement with the school, my stay in Mangochi town brought me into contact with local representatives of the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM). The administrative secretary of the Mangochi branch of the MAM was particularly helpful in introducing me to the



activities of the organisation in the district. This allowed me to gain some insight into the role of the MAM in the contemporary changes in Islam throughout the region, as I was on various occasions able to stay with him at the Islamic Centre then under construction near Mangochi, and to travel with him in the course of his duties in the district. Much of my time in Mangochi town was spent acquainting myself with the activities of individuals associated with what I refer to as the 'new reformist' movement, some of whom were involved with the MAM, and most of whom were based in the town.

While this work was an essential part of my project, it became clear that in order to grasp the wider picture of Islam in the district, I would need to move outside the town. The choice of Makwinja village, adjacent to the Malindi mission on the eastern lake shore, was influenced partly by convenience and partly by research considerations. I had visited Malindi several times whilst staying in Mangochi, and had met several people from the village. It turned out that the Malindi potteries, attached to the mission, had a house on the boundary of the mission and the village, and I was able to rent it from them for some months. The proximity of the mission, established by the UMCA at the turn of the century, gave me both the additional historical depth of missionary records and the opportunity to assess the influence of the presence of this competitor to Islam on the Yao in the vicinity.



My move to Malindi at the end of December was inaugurated by a very severe attack of malaria. Although I had taken the appropriate precautions against this, Malawi was known to have resistant strains of the disease, and it was not the last time I suffered from it. I was seriously ill for only a few days, but it left me in a considerably weakened condition, and my health did not fully recover for the duration of my stay in Malawi. My living conditions were also rather less easy than they had been in Mangochi. The house at Malindi was completely unfurnished and constant worry about the shortage of funds, and trying to eke them out over the duration of my fieldwork, made me reluctant to purchase any but the barest of necessities. But in other respects the house was in an ideal situation for my purposes, at the point where the lakeshore road intersected with the path to the mission, and near to the centre of Makwinja village.

Apart from my health, the most pressing issue that confronted the start of my work at Malindi was that of language. In Mangochi town this had not been much of a problem, since most of the people with whom I was then working could speak English. I had of course continued to work on the Yao language, mainly with a Mozambican Yao employed at the school, but by the time that I arrived at Malindi I was still far from having a firm grasp of Chiyao. The immediate solution was to find an interpreter, and fortunately my nearest neighbour in the village was prepared to undertake this task. He was a Muslim, but had

at one time worked for the Malindi pottery, and had a fairly good command of English. We had an informal arrangement whereby he helped me with interviews and in my attempt to learn Chiyao, and in return I gave him sums of cash which we agreed upon as commensurate with his time. Working through an interpreter has all sorts of drawbacks, but it did allow me to get on with interviews which would otherwise have been impossible, and as my competence in Chiyao gradually improved I was able to become less dependent on his assistance. It was nonetheless very useful at first to be associated in this way with someone from the village, mediating my interaction with the villagers, since it gave them an easier access to me. People who may have been intimidated or suspicious of my presence in the area could satisfy their curiosity about my activities without having initially to approach me directly.

During the four months which I spent at Malindi, the main part of my efforts was directed towards gaining some familiarity with village life in general. Makwinja village was the focus of my attention, but there were several other lakeshore villages within walking distance with which I became acquainted. Much of the material which was collected in this fashion had little direct connection with the ultimate objectives of my research, but the details of the daily life of the villagers which gradually accumulated in my field-notes were the indispensable background to tracing the influence of Islam in the area. This did not of course preclude more formal interviews with sheikhs and *waalimu*



(Muslim teachers) in the vicinity, or particular attention to events of an overtly Islamic character, and Malindi was close enough to Mangochi town - some 20 kilometres on a road which was passable except after heavy rains - for me to maintain regular contact with informants there and to keep abreast of developments in the district at large. Towards the end of my stay at Malindi I ventured up the lake to Likoma island, the erstwhile headquarters of the UMCA, and spent a few days at Nkhotakota on the way back. This town on the west side of the lake is one of the few significant concentrations of Muslims outside the predominantly Yao areas of Malawi, and although my stay was brief, I was able to visit mosques and *madrasas* (Quran schools) in and around the town, and to interview some of the sheikhs in the vicinity.

At the end of April I moved from Malindi to Mpilipili, in Makanjila's chiefdom, roughly 100 kilometres north of Mangochi town on the east side of the lake. It had been my intention for some time to go to Makanjila's and several considerations, including the onset of the dry season and the fact that the Malindi potteries needed the house in which I was living, persuaded me that this was a good opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Transport to Makanjila's was always a major

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<sup>1</sup>I am able to add (after the election of 1994) that one of the reasons that I decided to leave Makwinja was that I had discovered it had been the home of Henry Chipembere, the arch-enemy of Dr Banda, and it appeared to me that my presence there was attracting the interest of agents of the regime. My fears about my own safety but more particularly that of my acquaintances around Malindi (who were much more seriously at risk of retribution) played a significant part in the subsequent events of my fieldwork. The full story of the consequences of the 1964 crisis has yet to be written.



difficulty, but in the dry season some four-wheel drive vehicles were able to get through on the rudimentary road which passed through Malindi and up the lakeshore to Mpilipili. Apart from footpaths, the only other connection between Makanjila's and the outside world was the lake boat, which crossed from Monkey Bay on the west side of the lake to call at Chilinda, near Mpilipili, on its way up and down the lake.

Mpilipili, the village of the chief, is a large, sprawling settlement of some two thousand persons. I arrived at night, having taken a lift on a government vehicle from Mangochi town. I found accommodation first in a private rest-house near the centre of the village, and later in a house attached to the Rural Growth Centre, which was then under construction in Mpilipili. Initially my work in this new location went quite well, despite the various hardships of living in an isolated area in which food and drinking water were difficult to obtain. There were several sheikhs based in or near Mpilipili with whom I was able to conduct some very useful interviews, in particular on the history of Islam among the Yao. It also became apparent that some of the cleavages and disputes among the Muslims which had attracted my attention in Mangochi and Malindi were given expression here in an illuminating and emphatic manner. The beginning of Ramadan, the month of fasting, occurred soon after my arrival in Mpilipili, and this served to increase the interest and awareness of the local Muslims in matters

concerned with Islam, as well as enabling me to observe the various activities associated with this period.

Unfortunately, not long after my arrival in Makanjila's, my health once again deteriorated. Repeated attacks of diarrhoea, and fevers which may have been a recurrence of malaria, left me seriously weakened. The symptoms of depression with which I had been struggling for some time before going to Mpilipili became rapidly exacerbated. At the end of May, I left Makanjila's by boat for Monkey Bay, and I did not return. In the weeks which followed I sank further into what became a clinical depression. This was not the first time that I had suffered from depression, and although on more than one occasion in the past I had sought medical treatment for it, the symptoms had never seemed too serious, and had been alleviated after some time. My actions after leaving Makanjila's were to some extent governed by the hope that the spell of depression, which I recognised well enough as such, would somehow be broken, and that I would be able to return and carry on with my work.

However, my condition continued to deteriorate, and after staying with friends in Zomba for a while, and returning to Malindi in the hope of gradually picking up my work again under easier conditions, I eventually drifted to Blantyre. By this time it was clear that I would no longer be able to continue with my fieldwork in any constructive way, and the only sensible course of action was to book my return flight



to England as quickly as possible. I took a room in a rest-house in Blantyre, but instead of making arrangements to leave or seeking the help of friends to do so, I sank into a state of inertia and was gradually overwhelmed by a feeling that I would never leave Malawi. Thus I remained for several weeks, until I was located by friends from Mangochi, who set about getting me onto a flight.

Fortunately, one of my erstwhile lecturers from Cape Town stopped over in Malawi, and it was decided that I should accompany him to South Africa to join my family and have medical treatment.

So it was that I left Malawi, and after a period of treatment in a clinic in Cape Town, I came back to Cambridge to begin work on my thesis while continuing to have psychiatric treatment. The condition from which I was suffering was eventually diagnosed as a manic-depressive psychosis, and since being prescribed the appropriate medication, I have been spared the worst effects of the syndrome. The spells of depression which have afflicted me from time to time and with such severity during my fieldwork are, it would seem, simply the symptoms of an illness, a biochemical imbalance. But perhaps it is worth stressing, with regard to the influence that depression had on my fieldwork, that it was not experienced as a mere illness. For me, depression is like entering a different world, and that world can be described in one word - Hell. I suppose, looking back on it, the curious thing for me about the conditions that precipitated my depression in



Malawi is that now one circumstance seems to me to hold the key to it: I had come across - by chance and in a rather bizarre location at Malindi - a battered paperback copy of Dryden's beautiful translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and since I had run out of reading matter and books were not easy to come by, I read it with a peculiar intensity. It's easy to read too much into things of this sort, but there was something both terrifying and compelling - perhaps simply a way of looking - that disclosed itself in that combination of book and place.

These then are some of the details against which the 'facts' of this work need to be weighed, and others will emerge as they are woven into the fabric of the ethnography. But although this outline of my tribulations may perhaps have done something to dispel that obscurity which troubled Malinowski about the conditions of fieldwork, and clearly the strange and nearly disastrous latter part of my stay in Malawi raises certain doubts about the 'objectivity' of my research, in the end it comes down to a question of truth (that dirty word): What best qualifies someone to represent social reality, to arrive at ethnographic truth? In the paper cited above, Leach suggested that ethnography is closer to fiction than to scientific writing, and certainly if Malinowski may be taken as a prototypical ethnographer the influence of Conrad is much in evidence. The problem with this idea - and it becomes very clear when one attempts any sort of historical ethnography and has to sift through the accounts

of missionaries and travellers - is that reliable information contained in an incoherent and fragmentary account may often be more useful than an elegant analysis in stylish prose. Yet that work of the imagination which transforms the many and various interactions with individuals in the 'field' into ethnography does have much in common with the work of the novelist - or at least the novelist of the nineteenth century. No fieldworker ever actually sees a society, or a community, or a tribe, or a class, or whichever construct is then taken to be an appropriate unit of analysis. The fieldworker sees and interacts with people in groups and as individuals, and then imagines a social entity. It may just be the fate of social anthropologists to be bad novelists and marginal scientists, or the poor relations of historians. It is this ambiguous status of social anthropology, almost that of an anti-science, that persuades me that valuable insights may emerge from a fieldwork experience that can at best be described as unorthodox. After all, the radical edge that is unique to anthropology is continually being honed in the various and unpredictable interactions that are termed fieldwork.

What is also of importance, though, is to give a voice to people who even now, in the 'new world order', often have no voice at all. Many of the people who I describe as Yao Muslims in Malawi and especially those across the border in Mozambique really do live in some kind of a hell which most have little hope of escaping in this life. Poverty and

powerlessness, the war in Mozambique and the terrible threat of Aids have all contributed towards a very bleak future for people living in one of the most beautiful and fertile parts of the world. Some of the Muslims in Malawi, as I indicate, are increasingly asserting themselves and finding a new voice. But for many people in the area, and especially the older generation, there is not much access to the world at large. It is in this, in representing the conditions of life of these people, that questions of truth and authenticity - or at the very least of reliability - have to take priority over considerations of theory or style. I don't claim to speak for these people, but in representing them in this work I hope that something more of their lives may be redeemed, and while I make various theoretical constructions (Leach may have called them fictions) on the basis of my experience of a few of them, I have tried to keep speculation apart from description.



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## BACKGROUND

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From Blantyre the road to Mangochi passes through Zomba and then winds steeply down from the Shire highlands into the Rift Valley. After crossing the Shire River at Liwonde, the road forks, the left branch leading to the capital Lilongwe and the right leading to Mangochi. It skirts the west side of Lake Malombe and just before meeting the southern tip of Lake Malawi the road comes upon Mangochi town, and then sweeps on past to Monkey Bay. Mangochi town, squashed between the road and the river and the two lakes, is in fact the product of one of the earliest ventures into town planning in central Africa. It was laid out on its present site in 1897 and named Fort Johnston, replacing an encampment opposite Mponda's as the military and administrative headquarters of the district (Malambo, 1984/85: 3). Nowadays the road into town passes a few rest-houses and stores, the local government headquarters, the hospital, the secondary school, the new Catholic cathedral (St Augustine's) and the police station before it reaches the bridge across the Shire river.

Opposite the school a road branches off at right angles, in the direction of Lake Malawi, and leads to the commercial centre of the town. A row of shops culminates in the large grocery, the PTC, beyond which is a tree-lined square used as a sports ground and for public ceremonies. Behind the PTC is the main mosque of Mangochi town, a large old building set back from the road and approached through a courtyard shaded by huge mango trees. Attached to the mosque is a *madrassa*, with classrooms and dormitories for boys. Between the mosque and the PTC is a small shop which became, during the time I was there, a book shop specialising in Islamic literature - the Safari Book shop. The road continues on past the PTC and the sports ground, running parallel to the river, and passing the market on the right and the town council rest-house on the left. It then deteriorates into a badly rutted track, and after some three kilometres it reaches the heart of Mponda's village, beyond which is the marshy ground at the outlet of the Shire river from the lake. There is no visible boundary between the town and Mponda's village, which was always one of the largest in the country, and has grown into a sprawling maze of paths and buildings and tiny gardens.

Across the bridge over the Shire, the tarmac road heads out across a stretch of marshy ground and then begins to climb steeply up the escarpment to the Mangochi hills. At the foot of the hills, visible from the bridge, is a large new complex of buildings - the new Roman Catholic seminary, St Paul's. After climbing to the top of the escarpment, the

road passes the villages of the Yao chiefs Chowe and Jalasi, and continues on to Namwera and the border with Mozambique. Near to St Paul's a dirt road sets off in the direction of the lake and, meeting the eastern shore of the lake, it passes through several large villages until, after some fifteen kilometres, it reaches the Malindi mission. Established at the beginning of the century by the Anglican UMCA, the mission now consists of the St Michael's Girls Secondary School, the Malindi potteries, the Anglican church, the mission hospital and the workshops. The whole complex lies in a narrow strip between the escarpment and the lake, the hills rising steeply very near to the shore at that point. There is also the Malindi primary school, situated on the hillside opposite the church. Next to the potteries is a grocery, selling a limited selection of goods and foodstuffs, and further on is a small open market by the side of the road, selling some vegetables when in season and fish.

Beyond Malindi the road continues on up the eastern side of the lake to Mpilipili, the centre of Makanjila's chiefdom, but it quickly becomes impassable to most vehicles even in the dry season. Most people get to and from Mpilipili by the lake boat which leaves Monkey Bay once a week and anchors off Chilinda near Mpilipili on its way up the lake, and stops again on its way back to Monkey Bay. Mpilipili is a large and well-established settlement, taking its name from the grove of pepper trees which was planted in the days when it was a centre of the slave trade. It is now the



site of a so-called 'Rural Growth Centre' funded by the German government and which was close to completion in 1986. This consists of a covered market, a community hall with a library, and some offices and houses for workers employed by the centre. Outside Mpilipili there is a very large police post, ostensibly to monitor the number of refugees who were fleeing into Malawi from the war which was just a few kilometres away in Mozambique. Mpilipili has also a post office, a clinic, a 'traditional court' and a primary school, as well as several small shops and rest-houses. There are two large mosques in Mpilipili, and several small ones on the outskirts of the settlement.

The road to Mpilipili passes through several villages close to Malindi, the first of which is Makwinja village, and then the terrain becomes very sparsely populated until near to Mpilipili. The villages outside the larger centres in the District tend to be strung out along a road or a path, as was the case when Mitchell worked in the region (1956: 46), and nearly all the villages have a mosque. Houses and mosques are usually built of pole and daub and are rectangular in shape. Most houses are thatched, while mosques may be distinguished by having an iron roof and by a variety of architectural ornament. Village mosques are often painted quite decoratively according to the taste of the builders, unlike the mosques recently constructed by the Muslim Association, which are built from brick and decorated uniformly in an austere Middle Eastern design. Village dwellings tend to be clustered into little groups

surrounded by fruit trees - mango, papaya and banana - with gardens of maize, cassava, rice or sugar cane further afield.

Most of the villages with which I became familiar were, like Makwinja, close to the lake and many villagers depended on fishing to supplement their diets and incomes. A prerequisite for fishing is access to a dug-out canoe, a net and a lamp, since the favoured method of catching the tiny *usipa* (*Engraulicypris sardella*) fish is to lure shoals of them to the side of the lake at night. This involves considerable skill and patience, as the fish have to be attracted to a lamp suspended from the canoe, which then has to be paddled very gently into the shallows without frightening the fish away. It is an unforgettable spectacle, this great flotilla of lamp-lit canoes drifting silently out of the darkness towards the edge of the lake. It is not, however, very rewarding for the fishermen as catches of *usipa* have been declining in recent years. Villagers claim that this is a result of large-scale fishing by government boats based on the opposite side of the lake.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, fishing is pursued with great persistence by those who are able to, and since very few people in this lakeside area have any livestock apart from fowls, the tiny fish dried and cooked as a relish forms an important part of their diet. Other fish including *chambo* (tilapia) and *kampango* (catfish) are caught using larger

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<sup>1</sup>This may be given some confirmation by statistics on fish production in Table 8.20 of the *Malawi Statistical Yearbook 1987*, which shows that government production increased from 29 000 Tonnes in 1985 to 35 500 Tonnes in 1986 and 56 600 in 1987.



nets but catches are small and in any case many Muslims refuse to eat the catfish because they claim that the fact that it has no scales makes it forbidden food.

1987 - Population Density			
	Population	Land Area (square km)	Population Density
Mangochi	495 876	6 272	79
Southern Region	3 959 448	31 752	125
Malawi	7 982 607	94 276	85

Table 1: Population density (number of persons per square kilometre) in Mangochi, the Southern Region and Malawi.<sup>1</sup>

Land suitable for agriculture is scarce in this part of Malawi, despite the fact that Mangochi District does not have a particularly high population density in comparison with the rest of the Southern Region (see Table 1). The shortage of land is especially acute in the lakeside belt from Malindi up to Mpilipili, partly as a result of the escarpment rising so steeply near to the lake. Those who have gardens and fields close to the lake are able to grow rice as well as maize and cassava, but very few people are able to grow sufficient of the staple crops to feed themselves for the whole year without having to purchase

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Table 2,5 of the *Malawi Statistical Yearbook 1987*.



extra grain. What this means is that not many villagers are able to produce enough from the lake and their land to satisfy their needs or to create a surplus, and therefore look to other sources for income.

It has been the aim of many young men to go to the gold mines in South Africa but by 1986 it was very difficult for Malawians to gain employment through the regular channels of recruitment to the mines. There is also the possibility of finding employment in other situations in South Africa, though this has also become increasingly difficult and usually requires considerable funding for travel expenses as well as good contacts inside South Africa. Within Malawi there are very limited opportunities for employment. People living near to Mangochi town or the Malindi mission are sometimes able to find work there, but most positions in the civil service and the church are filled by people from outside the district. For reasons which will become clear, the general level of education and literacy is very low in Mangochi District and this, in combination with other political factors, has made it difficult for the local inhabitants to be recruited in any sector of the state administration.

The political factors to which I have just alluded are closely connected with the situation of most of the population of Mangochi District as a religious and tribal minority that, after the uprising of 1964, was treated with some suspicion by the Banda regime. It was Dr Banda's

strategy to appear to downplay tribal differences while actually entrenching the interests of one language group - the Chewa. One of the consequences of this is that there are no recent statistics on language or tribal affiliation. Furthermore, the last census which collected information on religious affiliation was in 1931, so the difficulties of constructing a linguistic and religious profile of contemporary Mangochi District are considerable. However, since it is clear that their status as a minority has had a considerable influence on the recent history of the Yao Muslims, it is worth attempting to construct some sort of a picture of the tribal and religious composition of the region, even if it cannot be taken as a totally accurate representation of the current situation.<sup>1</sup> In any case, as in many other contexts, concepts such as 'tribe' and 'religion' have to be treated with a great deal of caution when applied to population statistics, and a little historical detachment is an additional safeguard.

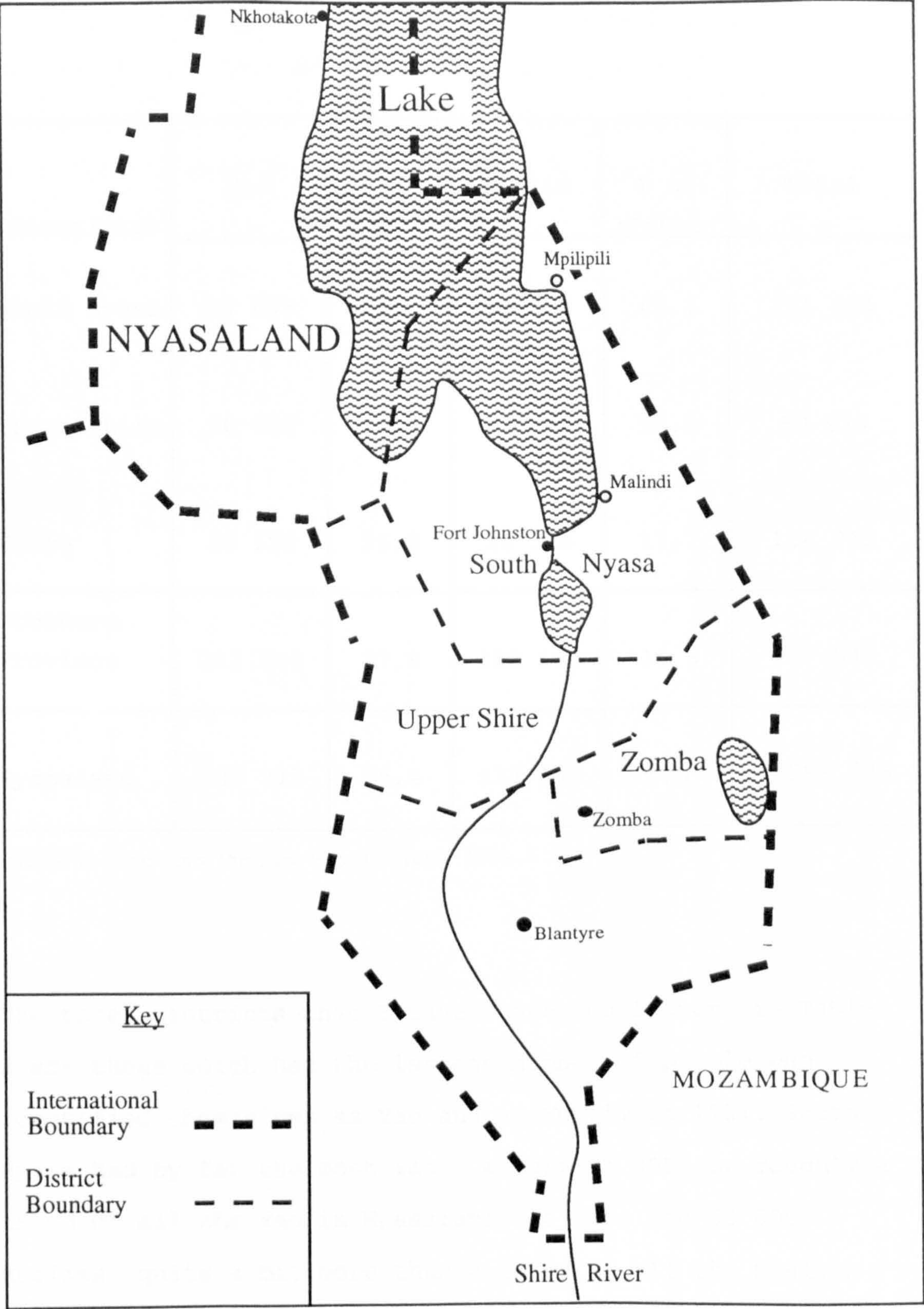
Thus 1931, the year of the last census to collect information on both religious and tribal affiliation, will be taken as a convenient date for this provisional profile of the region. The names of Mangochi District as well as that of the country have changed since then, as Map 2 reveals, and the actual boundary of South Nyasa District was somewhat different to that of the present Mangochi District, but by and large they cover the same territory.

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<sup>1</sup>The history of Yao settlement in the region, and questions of 'tribe' and the relation of Yao identity to Islam are dealt with in Chapters 6 and 7.

There are several other relevant name changes apart from that of South Nyasa to Mangochi District: Upper Shire, the adjacent district to the south, has become Machinga, and its boundaries have also altered to some extent. Mangochi town was named Fort Johnston in 1931. Zomba District retains its name, though its boundaries have also shifted slightly. These three districts, then as now, stretch from the Shire highlands (upon which Zomba and Blantyre are located) to the southern tip of the lake.





Map 2: Southern Nyasaland in 1931, showing selected districts.

1931					
(Districts)	Yao	% of Total	Muslim	% of Total	Total
South Nyasa	84 433	75,7	50 267	45,1	111 484
Upper Shire	36 832	60,4	22 741	37,3	60 934
Zomba	28 150	26,8	18 528	17,7	104 965
Southern Province	211 048	27,9	108 183	14,3	757 541
Nyasaland	246 713	15,4	133 833	8,4	1 599 888

Table 2: Yao and Muslim Population, 1931.<sup>1</sup>

The three districts that I have chosen to feature in Table 2 are those which had the largest number of people who identified themselves as Yao and as Muslim in 1931. South Nyasa had by far the most Yao - almost 85 000, or roughly a third of all the Yao in Nyasaland. It also had 50 000 Muslims, quite a bit more than a third of all the Muslims in the country. In each of the districts the number of Yao exceeds the number of Muslims in a very approximate ratio

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Table Q and Table R of the Report on the Census of 1931 (Nyasaland Protectorate).



of 3 : 2. Taking the figures for the Southern Province and the whole of Nyasaland, this ratio becomes roughly 2 : 1, which is to be expected since South Nyasa was the historical stronghold of Islam among the Yao and further away from it there are pockets of Yao-speakers upon whom Islam impinged only later if at all.

1931

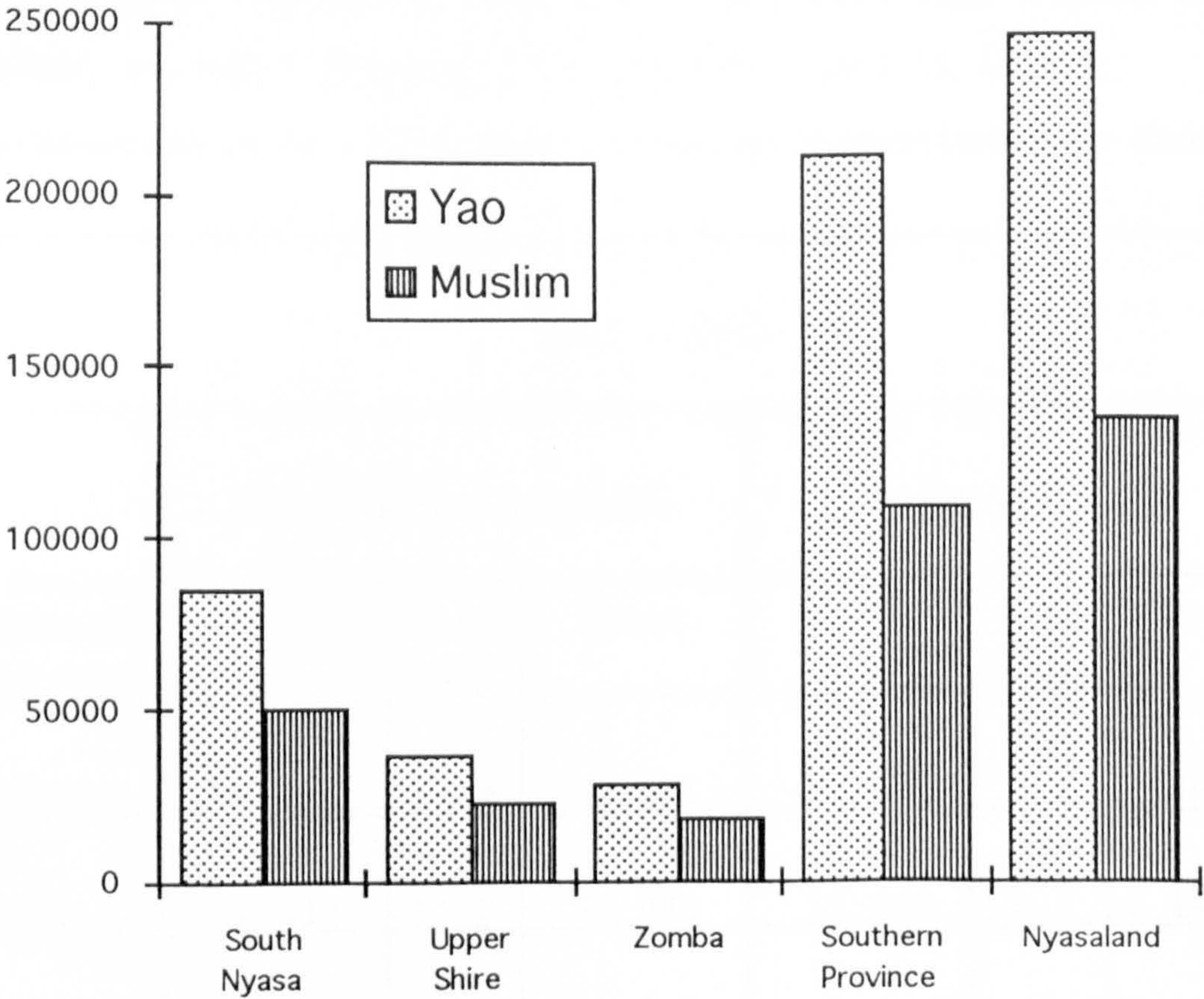


Diagram 1: Yao and Muslim Comparison

The proportion of the total population of Nyasaland who identified themselves as Yao remained constant at 15,4% between 1921 and 1931, but diminished somewhat in the 1945



census. It seems clear that at that time most of the Yao in Nyasaland were concentrated in a strip running from Blantyre north-east to Fort Johnston (Mangochi) and on to Mpilipili, and there is no reason to suspect that this situation has changed very much. Most of the people who claimed to be Muslims in Nyasaland in 1931 also fall into this strip, and it is fairly safe to assume that almost all of those in this region who claimed to,be Muslim also identified themselves as Yao. However, as Table 3 indicates, the Muslim population was much less stable over time, at least between 1911 and 1931, and it is not unreasonable to think that it may have continued to change.

1911 - 1931						
	South Nyasa District			Nyasaland		
Year of Census	Muslim	% of Total	Total	Muslim	% of Total	Total
1911	10 700	13,4	79 913	57 664	5,9	969 183
1921	11 112	11,7	95 083	73 015	6,1	1 199 934
1931	50 267	45,1	111 484	133 833	8,4	1 599 888

Table 3: Growth of Muslim Population, 1911-1931.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Table of Religions of the Census of the Nyasaland Protectorate 1911(the 1911 figures are estimates), Table of Religions of the Census of the Nyasaland Protectorate 1921 and Table R of the Report on the Census of 1931 (Nyasaland Protectorate).

The possible reasons for the dramatic increase in the number of Muslims, particularly between 1921 and 1931, will be explored more thoroughly in chapters below, but it is useful to consider here the comments of the author of the *Report on the Census of 1931*:

Natives professing Christianity increased from 103,001 in 1921 to 175,827, an increase of 70.7%. Mohammedans show an even greater increase from 73,015 to 133,833 or 83.3%. This is probably largely due to the fact that the Yao who formerly preferred to save trouble by professing the ordinary Paganism of the Native has no longer any hesitation in admitting his Mohammedanism now that it has lost its invidious association with Arab slave traders. It was commonly supposed that Mohammedanism was stationary or on the wane largely owing to the fact that it has no economic value. A native attending a Christian mission learns to read and write, accomplishments readily convertible into cash, whereas a Mohammedan youth merely learns the Koran. The census figures suggest that this popular supposition must be reviewed. (1932: 28)

Taking the figures for South Nyasa District the increase is even more startling: from 11 112 to 50 267, or 12% of the total population of the district in 1921 to 45% in 1931. The author of the *Report* advances a rather dubious explanation for this sudden increase - that Islam had lost its association with the slave trade. However, if that were the case, the increase would more probably have been reflected in the 1921 census, especially since, as White (1984: 534) claims, it was advantageous to be identified as a Yao Muslim in the wake of the 1915 Chilembwe rising. A more plausible explanation - still, however, conjectural - may be that the activities of the sheikhs and the *tariqa*



(described in Chapter 8) and perhaps even the beginnings of the *sukuti* movement, had encouraged people to declare themselves as Muslim. What is most interesting about the remarks in the *Report*, though, is that on the one hand the author appears to believe that the actual proportion of Yao Muslims had not changed much, but rather that the number of those willing to declare themselves as such had increased. On the other hand, this is taken as sufficient reason to reconsider the view that Islam was 'stationary' - a view that had been based on the perceived lack of economic incentive to becoming a Muslim, and one derived from ideas which are not uncommon in the sociology of religion. However, the author of the *Report* does acknowledge the need to seek a less reductive explanation for the change.

In the light of the sudden rise in the number of Muslims in the period from 1921 to 1931, it is especially unfortunate that 1931 was the last census in which religious affiliation was investigated. It is only possible to speculate about subsequent changes in the proportion of the population which is Muslim, but does seem likely that it continued to rise somewhat after 1931, though probably not to the extent that Panjwani (1979: 159) suggests. There is no evidence that, with the exception of small pockets of Muslims at Nkhotakota and in the far north of the country, Islam has made inroads on any group except the Yao, and it is therefore unlikely to expect that the proportion of Muslims would exceed the proportion of Yao in the country at any time in the past. Nevertheless, in the years between

1931 and the present it is certain that the number of people professing 'the ordinary Paganism of the Native' has continued to dwindle, but outside of the Yao Muslim belt this would have been mostly to the benefit of Christian churches.

1931 - Religions			
	Christian (%)	Muslim (%)	Pagan (%)
(Districts)			
South Nyasa	4,7	45,1	50,2
Upper Shire	4,6	37,3	58,1
Zomba	12,9	17,7	69,4
Southern Province	10,4	14,3	75,3
Nyasaland	11,0	8,4	80,6

Table 4: Religions in 1931.<sup>1</sup>

As Table 4 reveals, 80% of the population of Nyasaland was 'Pagan' in 1931, but Christians were already out-numbering Muslims in the whole of the country. Only in South Nyasa and Upper Shire, where there were large numbers of Muslims and only a very small proportion of Christians, is it likely that the proportion of Muslims would have continued to grow significantly.

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Table R of the *Report on the Census of 1931 (Nyasaland Protectorate)*.



I stressed earlier the dangers of extrapolating from these figures, but since impressionistic estimates are the only other alternative, it may be worth summarising the possibilities which these statistics suggest. First, it would seem likely that in the south of the country at least, most Muslims are from a Yao-speaking background, but there may be significant numbers of Yao-speakers who are not Muslim. Second, most of the Yao Muslims are to be found in a belt stretching north-east from Blantyre past Mangochi to the border with Mozambique, and they are most densely concentrated in Mangochi District (the erstwhile South Nyasa). Third, while it is probable that the proportion of Muslims in the country has grown since the 8,4% in 1931, it seems unlikely that it has ever reached much more than 10% of the total population. On the basis of these figures and my own impressions in 1986, I am inclined to support the estimate which Bone (1982: 130) made, that there are now between 10% and 12% of the population of Malawi who are Muslim, the vast majority of whom are also Yao-speaking. It can be stated with some confidence that Mangochi District is predominantly Muslim and Yao-speaking, though Mangochi town, Malindi and Namwera have significant numbers of Christians, many of whom are temporary residents - civil servants or church employees from outside the district.

The last three decades have not been particularly kind to the people of Mangochi District. Having started the post-independence era with a failed uprising against the

government, the district has not been one of the main targets for help from state resources. It has also benefited only a little from the schools and hospitals that Christian organisations have continued to provide mainly in other regions. The most recent census suggests that Mangochi has almost the lowest level of formal education in the country (see Chapter 11), and this situation along with the political factors outlined above has clearly had a detrimental effect on access to employment. Yao Muslims have in the past often sought employment further afield, particularly on the mines in South Africa, but this has recently become difficult. One of the reasons for this is the growing alarm at the spread of HIV and Aids in Malawi, which the government eventually recognised publicly in 1986. It is too early for there to be reliable indicators of the extent of the disease in the region but, as Malambo (1984/85: 20) pointed out, Mangochi has in recent times been a notorious centre of prostitution and it is to be expected that it will be one of the worst affected areas of the country. This, on top of other diseases such as malaria, dysentery and pneumonia which are endemic to the area, as well as wide-spread malnutrition and under-nutrition, makes a rather bleak outlook for the general conditions of life in the district.

The war across the border in Mozambique also had unfortunate consequences for the people of the district. It raised the general level of political tension, especially in places near to the border like Mpilipili. And of course



it led to an influx of refugees, many of whom were Yao Muslims seeking a place to settle and indeed many of those who came across the border into Mangochi District were absorbed by the local villages and are unlikely to return to Mozambique. However, the pitiful condition of the refugees and the stories of horrible atrocities that some of them brought across the border has served as a reminder to the people of Mangochi that their plight could be much worse. The demise of the Banda regime is unlikely to bring any sudden transformation of the conditions of life of the Yao Muslims, but there does appear to be a movement of power in the direction of the southern region that may in time improve their fortunes. The one avenue of advancement to which they continue to have a unique access is of course Islam itself, and the recent Muslim revival has certainly created new opportunities, especially for the youth of the district. In the current climate of hope and possibility as in the dark and oppressive passages of their recent history there is the consideration for Malawian Muslims that signs of the Last Day are plentiful, and increasingly their actions are likely to be guided by their preparation for that event.

## 4

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## ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE YAO

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The Yao have been represented in various styles of ethnography, ranging from early missionary ethnography through colonial and indigenous accounts to the ethnographic monograph of social anthropology in its heyday. The first substantial body of information about the Yao comes from Livingstone and other members of the Zambesi expedition, and the missionaries in the vanguard of the UMCA, who encountered the Yao in the process of an invasion of the Shire highlands in the 1860s. Most of this material is concerned with the havoc which the Yao were wreaking on the other inhabitants of the Shire highlands, but it does give occasional glimpses of life among the Yao invaders, and in particular, of their political and economic organisation. What these accounts reveal most clearly, though, is that the Yao were in a state of flux and transformation, spurred into movement by famine, the onslaught of neighbouring tribes, and competition among Yao chiefs for slaves. They were settling among other tribes, in particular the Mang'anja, enslaving them and often intermarrying. In short, the first real view that we have



of the Yao is of people in the midst of a massive upheaval, with blurred boundaries and changing economic, political and social systems. Given this state of affairs, what is remarkable about missionary accounts of the Yao in the latter half of the nineteenth century is their certainty that they are dealing with one identifiable tribe. This certainty stems in part from their knowledge of the involvement of the Yao in the slave trade, from the conflicts which had developed on a wide front between the Yao and the other inhabitants of the region, and from cultural and especially linguistic differences which were quickly apparent in setting the Yao apart from their neighbours on the Shire highlands.

The identity of the Yao was further clarified for the missionaries by the journey which Livingstone made through the centres of Yao settlement in northern Mozambique in 1866. Two of Livingstone's companions, Chuma and Wakatani, were Yao and this certainly facilitated his efforts to gather information about the area and the people. His journey up the Rovuma and to the southern tip of the Lake, documented in his *Last Journals* (Waller, 1874), cut through the very heart of the areas which the Yao had inhabited before their migrations, and which were still occupied by some of their more powerful chiefs. His description of Mwembe, Mataka's town and its surrounding villages, is the earliest account of life within a settled Yao chiefdom. And by contrast we have illuminating accounts of his visits to Mukate's town beneath Mangochi mountain and Mponda's town

just below the southern tip of the Lake, both Yao chiefs who had migrated south into what is now Malawi.

Some fifteen years later, the UMCA missionary W.P.Johnson made a similar journey up the Rovuma to Mwembe, and then on to the Lake, visiting and describing Makanjila's town which had recently been transplanted to the lakeshore, an account of which was published in 1884. Johnson's descriptions of the Yao are particularly valuable from my point of view, since he was concerned about the influence of Islam on the Yao, and the duration of his contact with the Yao, from 1880 to the turn of the century, was the period during which conversion to Islam became widespread. He published his views on this in several of the articles and books (1922 & 1924) which arose from his experiences in the region. Furthermore, compared with some of the other Christian missionaries, he was well-informed about Islam, and carried a Quran with him on his travels.

There were several British travellers who visited the regions of Yao settlement and migration in the 1870s and '80s, and who published details of their encounters with the Yao. Notable among these is Joseph Thomson (1882) who skirted the Yao settlements in Mozambique and gave a brief description of the tribe and their homeland. Two useful accounts of the Yao on the southern lakeshores, and particularly the chiefdoms of Mponda and Makanjila, were given by E.D.Young (1877) and the British Consul at Mozambique, J.F.Elton (1879). There are also occasional



observations about the Yao in Burton's works, though he encountered them only at the coast and usually as slaves.

The most significant contribution to the ethnography of the Yao from this period was made by a Scots missionary who worked on the Shire highlands at the Blantyre mission for three years from 1878. Duff Macdonald's *Africana or the Heart of Heathen Africa* (1882) is both an account of mission life and a perceptive ethnography of the Africans in the vicinity of Blantyre. Since Macdonald is careful to indicate the methods and sources of his ethnography, it is possible to separate reliable information from hearsay of dubious value. He seems to have been free of that impulse which some historians have ascribed to missionary ethnography, to find and classify 'tribes' even where these hardly existed. Macdonald was concerned rather to describe as fully as he could the people among whom he was working, and while he often makes no distinction between different tribes or languages in his observations, where these discriminations are pertinent he notes them. Most of the surrounding villages and many of his informants were Yao who were quite recently relocated from the Mangochi hills, so Macdonald's account is one of the first as well as one of the fullest descriptions of Yao settlers in what is now Malawi.

The ethnography of the European missionaries is of a variable quality, and is subject to the biases and prejudices that one would expect, but their accounts have

the attribute of clarity and attention to detail. Their observations, in short, are unconstrained by anthropological theory and tend to emerge from narratives of their experiences, so that what we are presented with are not structures and systems with examples of the manner in which these operate, but descriptions and details of encounters between missionaries and the people among whom they work. The disadvantage of this approach is that the information that can be gleaned from these accounts tends to be fragmentary, but the great advantage is that the fragments range widely over a great variety of topics. Thus, while it was possible for later ethnographers to describe the Yao with hardly any reference to the influence of Islam, this was not the case with the missionary accounts.

The publication in 1919 of Yohanna Abdallah's *Chiikala cha Wayao* (the Yaos long ago) is another major milestone in the ethnography of the Yao. Abdallah was a Yao priest, one of the first Africans to be ordained by the UMCA, and while his work owes something to the genre of mission ethnography, it is by no means a Christian-inspired apologia. It was written in the Yao language, and although it was published with an English translation as *The Yaos* by Meredith Sanderson, it is clear that Abdallah was writing to the Yaos and for them, rather than for an overseas audience - he was, incidentally, quite capable of writing in English, and had travelled to the Holy Land. Furthermore, Abdallah's ethnography is not of the narrative



sort that we associate with those of the missionaries. It anticipates the colonial ethnographies in its attempt to reconstruct a Yao society prior to the impact of a colonial regime. The literal translation of Abdallah's title, 'The Yaos long ago', indicates his intention to give an account of the Yao not as he finds them, but as they are supposed to have been before time overtook them. However, by concluding his compilation of customs and stories of the 'Yaos of old' with a history of two of the Yao chiefly dynasties, Makanjila and Mataka, he thrusts the Yao out of the timeless past of ethnographic reconstruction into the historical reality of changing circumstances. This is especially significant, in that Abdallah's ethnography, while displaying the nostalgia characteristic of much anthropological writing of that time, nevertheless affirms a belief in the continuing vitality of the Yao. In a sense, it is to this end that Abdallah wrote, rather than as a contribution to ethnography: "Therefore I wish to write a book all about the customs of we Yaos, so that we may remind ourselves whence we sprang and of our beginnings as a nation." (1919: 5)<sup>1</sup>

The sense of Yao identity which Abdallah was concerned to bolster emerges also in the work of two important colonial ethnographers, Sanderson and Stannus. I use the term 'colonial' here not in the sort of pejorative sense which it has acquired in recent decades, but simply descriptively, since both were in the employ of the

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<sup>1</sup>I use Sanderson's excellent translation throughout.

colonial government, not as ethnographers but, coincidentally, in the medical service. Stannus published a monograph on the Yao (1922) which ranges widely and somewhat randomly over Yao culture and social structure. It is Sanderson, however, who stands out as having made a major contribution to the ethnography of the Yao (1922, 1954, 1955). He came to Nyasaland in 1910 and remained there until his death in 1962, having devoted much of his life to the study of the language and culture of the Yao. He edited and translated Abdallah's work, and compiled a dictionary of the Yao language which reveals the awesome extent of his knowledge of the Yao. I was told, while in Malawi, that Sanderson had converted to Islam before his death, which seems a little unlikely, but is an indication perhaps of the extent to which Sanderson had become identified with the Yao.

Valuable though these ethnographies are, they tend to represent aspects of Yao culture abstracted from a social context, assuming rather than demonstrating that the Yao constitute an identifiable social group or a tribe. The revolution in the ethnography of the Yao was brought about by the arrival of J. Clyde Mitchell who published several articles on the Yao as well as a monograph which has become a classic text. *The Yao Village* (1956) is an exemplary study, outlining with clarity and detail the structure and political process of Yao chiefdoms and villages. But it pushes beyond the constraints of a structural-functionalist model, using statistical analysis to reveal the fluidity of



social structure. Mitchell analyses the complex relationships which link and rank chiefs and headmen, and demonstrates the pivotal role which the village headman and the sorority-group (*mbumba*) occupy in the matrilineal organisation of Yao villages. Above all, like much of the work of anthropologists associated with the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, Mitchell's ethnography has a strong historical base, locating the Yao firmly in the context of the political economy of colonial Nyasaland, and revealing the tensions which transformations in the larger regional structures had generated within the Yao.

One way of looking at the accumulated ethnographies of the Yao would be to see them as a series of snapshots of society in motion, each representing the Yao frozen at a particular moment in time. Taking this analogy, Mitchell's ethnography uses better equipment and produces the best focus and clearest definition. But in fact, it is only Mitchell, Macdonald and perhaps Johnson whose work can be compared in this way, since none of the other ethnographers were really concerned to describe the Yao as they found them, but rather intended to reconstruct a sort of ideal Yao society existing in a historical vacuum. Yet the assumption that all the ethnographers including Mitchell make, is that there is some essence of Yao society that has survived transplantation and changing circumstances. I share that view, not on the basis that there is an unchanging core of 'Yaoness', but on the contrary, that what has ensured the continuity of a Yao identity until



quite recently is its flexible nature and its capacity to transform itself to meet opportunity and adversity. This begs the question, of course, of why it should have suited the people who began to identify themselves as Yao to continue to do so.

The answer to this may be sought in attempts to construct a history, or historical ethnography, of the Yao.

Fortunately, since the publication of Mitchell's work some valuable historical studies of the Yao have indeed appeared, most notably from Edward Alpers (1969, 1972a, 1972b, 1975). Although Alpers's work on the Yao depends on archival sources rather than on fieldwork, his contribution to the historical understanding of the Yao is very substantial, throwing light on the incorporation of the Yao in the trading networks of east central Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and outlining the consequences of this on the political and social structures of the Yao. However, apart from a somewhat speculative analysis of the spread of Islam in the region, Alpers stops short of following the history of the Yao beyond the imposition of colonial rule. Jhala (1982) has built on this with a study of Yao interaction with the other inhabitants of the Shire highlands at the end of the nineteenth century.

The more recent history of the Yao in Nyasaland and Malawi has been touched upon in several more general studies of the region. Shepperson and Price (1958), in their

monumental work on John Chilembwe, deal with the situation of the Yao in the early years of the Protectorate. Other studies, particularly those by Linden (1974), McCracken (1977) and White (1984 & 1987), give useful insights into the effects of colonial rule and the growth of a nationalist movement on the Yao. Two scholars who have concentrated on the history of Islam in Malawi, David Bone and Robert Greenstein, have filled some of the gaps in this aspect of Yao history. Greenstein (1975 & 1976/77) carried out a series of interviews with Yao Muslim leaders and makes a valuable contribution to an analysis of the development of Islam among the Yao in the first half of this century. The focus of Bone's work (1982, 1984, 1985 & 1986) has been on the interaction of Muslims and Christians in the recent history of Malawi and on issues concerning the education of Muslims, outlining the administrative context within which the Yao Muslims have operated. There is also a lengthy study of the influence of Islam on the Yao in Mozambique written by a Portuguese missionary (Peirone, 1967) that contains some valuable descriptions of religious practices despite a somewhat unsympathetic approach.

Although the Yao seem recently to have attracted the attention of historians rather than anthropologists, there have been contributions of a more conventional ethnographic nature. The ethnologist Gerhard Kubik (1978 & 1984) has done wide-ranging research on initiation ceremonies, music, dance, and other aspects of Yao culture. The Malawian

sociologist J.A.K.Kandawire (1980), has addressed issues raised by Mitchell's work on the Yao, demonstrating that population growth within fixed administrative boundaries inhibits and distorts the processes of group segmentation central to Mitchell's analysis. My own contribution here I see as one towards an historical ethnography, in a sense making a virtue of necessity, but in the end the question which I had posed - one of the nature of social transformation - could only be answered by way of an historical dimension to this study. It moves between present and past to reconstruct a pattern of transformation in a way that is not dissimilar from the methods of evolutionist anthropology, though I have tried to avoid the pitfall of taking aspects of the present to represent those that they resemble in the past in an entirely uncritical manner. It is an attempt to describe what George Eliot, with reference to a different era of religious innovation, called the 'varying experiments of Time'.



## 5

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## THE MODEL

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For it is not the universal Idea which enters into opposition, conflict and danger; it keeps itself in the background, untouched and unharmed, and sends forth the particular interests of passion to fight and wear themselves out in its stead. It is what we may call the *cunning of reason* that it sets the passions to work in its service, so that the agents by which it gives itself existence must pay the penalty and suffer the loss.

Hegel

It is not always necessary or desirable to construct an explicit model in a work such as this, but to have avoided doing so would have been disingenuous. The structure of the thesis follows a fairly straightforward chronological scheme but, as the epigraph suggests, this implies something more than a simple historical narrative. The way in which the story of the Yao Muslims is unfolded here has a clear historicist tendency and for that I make no apology but it is best to be candid about it. It was not my intention when I began to try to make sense of my fieldwork

to impose any particular kind of interpretation upon it, but although I feel that the one that has emerged did so at least partly by a process of induction, it was pointed out to me that it falls into a certain tradition of thinking about social change. Thus constructing a model is a convenient way of outlining in brief the form and the argument of this work as well as of locating it in a wider theoretical field.

Particular elements of the model are drawn partly from Humphrey Fisher's model of Islamic conversion in Africa (1985), and partly from the dichotomy which several writers have made between popular forms of Islam often associated with Sufism and the scripturalist or reformed version.<sup>1</sup> In a more general and less easily attributable way, Hegelian and Weberian approaches to the history and sociology of religion have influenced my own, probably as much in the formulation of the problem as in the interpretation of the material. Brian Morris (1987: 5-18) has made a perceptive analysis of the influence of Hegel's philosophy on the anthropology of religion that I find myself much in sympathy with, although I had in fact presented the outline of this model in the form of a seminar before reading his book. There is however one writer, and indeed one book, which I am aware of having a very profound influence on my thinking about religion and that is Robertson Smith's *Religion of the Semites* (1927). In his emphasis on ritual

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<sup>1</sup>For instance Gellner (1981) who employs this dichotomy while indicating its limitations. I have discussed Fisher's work at some length in Chapter 7.

and practice as the key to understanding religion, his treatment of the difference between 'positive' (scriptural) religions and 'heathenism' and his focus on the social context of religious change, Robertson Smith has been the source of what I consider to be the more fruitful aspects of my approach to religion.

A study that has a more direct bearing on the topic that I am dealing with here and from which I have drawn much inspiration is of course Evans-Pritchard's account of the Sanusi of Cyrenaica. His analysis skilfully weaves the historical and structural dimensions of the interaction of the Sanyusiya Sufi Order and the Bedouin tribes together, and then gives a moving account of their resistance to Italian domination. The method that I have adopted in my description of the Yao Muslims owes much to his exemplary approach: "I have not aimed at giving a comprehensive account either of the Sanusiya Order or of the Bedouin tribes, but I have described both only in so far as seemed necessary to an understanding of the political development of the Order which sprang from their association." (Evans-Pritchard, 1949: iii-iv). In a similar fashion, I have not attempted to give a general account of Islam or of the Yao, but have concentrated my attention on the products of their interaction - the transformations of the Yao Muslims.

Some of the more recent work combining historical and anthropological approaches to religion takes its cue from Sahlins (1985) rather than Evans-Pritchard. Sahlins has put



forward a theory of history that enables us to see the spread of capitalism and the colonial encounter as being culturally constituted at every level. Drawing on symbolic anthropology and structuralism, he suggests that we need to understand historical change neither in terms of the logic of material forces nor of ideological systems but rather in terms of the symbolic schemes that mediate all human interaction. The Comaroffs have applied these notions to their studies of social change among the Tswana in southern Africa. Jean Comaroff summarised the approach that has informed much of their subsequent work as follows: "It sets out to examine the reciprocal interplay of human practice, social structure, and symbolic mediation, an interplay contained within the process of articulation between a peripheral community and a set of encompassing sociocultural forces." (1985: 3). This ambitious programme has underpinned their recent works (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991, 1992, 1993), and has guided them increasingly to focus on the role of Christianity in what they term the 'colonisation of consciousness' and to develop a metaphor of the process of colonisation as an extended conversation that changes both sides of the encounter: "Among the Southern Tswana, any effort to document such processes - to analyse, that is, the colonisation of consciousness and the consciousness of colonisation - begins with the entry of evangelical Christianity onto the historical landscape." (1992: 236). While there are many aspects of this approach that I find useful, it seems to me that often their fine historical

ethnographies would be even better without elaborate theoretical superstructures containing notions that are notoriously elusive of definition.

It is not my intention here to engage in extended debates with current trends in the anthropological and historical study of religion, and I have tried to let the story of the Yao Muslims unfold itself without too many excursions into the maze of contemporary anthropological theory. There are however a couple of other writers whose work has almost certainly influenced my thinking about religion and social change. Bloch (1986) and Werbner (1989) have both placed ritual practice at the centre of innovative studies of historical change. Bloch's detailed study of ritual in the changing modes of political domination and Werbner's comparative approach that moves from the rituals of domestic life to the way that regional political economies connect with religious movements have been the source of many stimulating ideas. It has nevertheless been my aim in constructing a model of the transformation of the Yao Muslims to give my attention primarily to their versions of religion rather than to the theories of anthropology.

It became clear to me while I was in Malawi that the Muslims in the area were divided into three main camps or factions. Most widespread and numerically strongest were adherents of the Sufi orders, known locally as *twaliki* or followers of the *tariqa*. Then there were the *sukuti* or 'quietists' (the term *sukuti* is derived from a Swahili verb



'to be quiet'). I had assumed from the little that has been written about the *sukuti* that they were a branch of one of the local Sufi orders, but it soon became apparent that they defined themselves in opposition to Sufi practices, and in fact were sometimes referred to as 'anti-Sufi.'

Lastly, there is a small but very active group who will be referred to as the 'new reformists' and who may be seen as the local representatives of the global Islamic revival. It is to explain the emergence of these factions and describe their characteristics and differences that this model of the development of Islam among the Yao is directed.

I suggest that there are three phases in the development of Islam in this region, each closely linked to one of the factions I mentioned. Phase One is that of appropriation and accommodation (Sufism). Phase Two is that of internal reform (*sukuti*). And Phase Three is that of the new reformism. Each phase may be defined in terms of a characteristic relationship to the Islamic scriptures, the Book. That is to say, the role of the Book changes with the development of each phase and, in some sense, an alteration in the status of the Book inaugurates each new phase and is a part of the mechanism that introduces the new phase. The Book moves from a subordinate position in Phase One to a contentious position in Phase Two and a dominant one in Phase Three.

One of the consequences of the shift from one phase to the next is a transformation in the identity of the Yao



Muslims. Putting it in a very schematic way, in Phase One such Islamic practice that is adopted is used to bolster an emerging Yao 'tribal' identity. This idiosyncratic and locally controlled version of Islam makes few demands upon its adherents, yet it furnishes them with a set of cultural markers which distinguish them very clearly from their neighbours, elaborating and supplementing rather than replacing distinctive Yao rituals. The development of Phase Two is a reaction against some of the practices associated with Phase One, and it tends to erode the unity of the distinctively 'Yao' Muslim identity. The *sukuti* movement opposes practices associated with Sufism, particularly the use of *dhikr*, but does not attempt any major social transformation of the Yao Muslims. It is with the appearance of Phase Three, the new reformist movement, that the great transformation of Yao Muslims begins. It also heralds the end of the Yao Muslims as such, since those who associate themselves with this movement see themselves primarily as simply Muslims, and any other identity is secondary and dispensable. The new reformists not only identify themselves as Muslim first and foremost, but they also model their behaviour and Islamic practice on that of an ideal type imported mainly from the Middle East. They repudiate the earlier stages of Islam in the region and commit themselves to what they see as a global Islamic identity. The change in Islamic practice, from a pragmatic Sufism to a more and more extreme reformism is thus part of an on-going metamorphosis of a local Yao Muslim identity into a supra-regional Muslim identity.

Before describing the onset of Phase One, some preliminary historical background is required.<sup>1</sup> The Yao were initially brought into contact with Islam by way of their trade with the coast, mainly at Kilwa. There is evidence that the Yao, who were settled in what is now northern Mozambique, were involved in trade with Swahili and Arabs on the coast by the middle of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century the demand for ivory and the growth of slave-trading in the area drew increasing numbers of the Yao into long-distance trading. The chiefs who rose to power during this period attained their position through a combination of trading and slave-raiding, dominating by the exercise of military power reinforced by the firearms acquired from their trading partners at the coast.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century there were a series of Yao migrations from northern Mozambique, mostly south-west toward the southern tip of Lake Malawi, though some moved north into what is now Tanzania. The cause of these migrations is not entirely clear, but would seem to have been a combination of the effects of famine in northern Mozambique, conflicts with neighbouring groups and conflicts between Yao chiefdoms competing for slaves. The general pattern of the migrations is that as the weaker Yao chiefdoms fled from attackers, they transformed themselves

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<sup>1</sup>In the outline which follows I have omitted references and details of sources, which are supplied in corresponding chapters below. The pre-Islamic history of the Yao and their conversion to Islam are described in Chapters 6 and 7, Sufism in Chapter 8, the *sukuti* movement in Chapter 9, and the new reformists in Chapter 11.



into invaders as they moved into what is now southern Malawi. By the time that Livingstone reached the area in the 1850s, the Yao were plundering and raiding for slaves among the Mang'anja inhabitants, and had established themselves as the dominant political force in the region.

Livingstone returned to Britain in 1857 and made an appeal at the Senate House in Cambridge which led to the formation of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa. The vanguard of the mission, which established itself at Magomero on the Shire highlands in 1861, soon came into conflict with Yao slavers. This conflict and other difficulties forced a temporary withdrawal to Zanzibar, but in the 1870s the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland established missions in the region and the numbers of British there began to grow. In 1891 a British Protectorate was declared over the territory then known as Nyasaland, and which is now Malawi. In the meantime the Yao chiefs became increasingly perturbed by the British presence in the region and the threat posed by it to the slave trade, and they attempted to consolidate links with their Arab and Swahili trading partners at the coast. In about 1870 Makanjila became the first of the Yao chiefs to convert to Islam, to be followed soon afterwards by several other of the powerful slaving chiefs.

The arrival in 1891 of Harry Johnston, the first Commissioner of the Protectorate, was quickly followed by the onset of a series of British campaigns against the Yao



chiefs, and although the British forces suffered some rather severe set-backs, the 'pacification' of Nyasaland and the termination of the slave trade in the region was accomplished by 1896. This defeat and the end of the slave trade, upon which a great deal of the power and wealth of the chiefs depended, clearly caused a severe erosion of their authority. Yet it was just at this time that conversion to Islam became really widespread among the Yao. In the face of British domination Islam became a means of legitimating the status of the chiefs, and the rituals which they controlled were the mechanisms by which this was accomplished. Thus by the turn of the century, many of the Yaos settled in southern Malawi were at least nominally Muslim.

These then are the conditions in which Phase One of my model develops - the newly-converted Yao Muslims isolated from the rest of the Muslim world and inside a British-controlled and increasingly Christian-dominated protectorate. So far the Book has not been very much in evidence, and although several of the chiefs are reported to have employed Swahili scribes in the slaving era, and the association of Islam with writing and books was well established, there is little to suggest that literacy was a central motive for conversion. Nor does it seem that the actual contents of the Quran were of much interest to the new converts. To the extent that the Book features in this first phase of the development of Islam, it is as part of a ritual system in which it operates as a sort of fetish, a

source of power rather than of doctrine. In this phase of appropriation and accommodation, the Book occupies a subordinate role, and it is certainly not the main attraction. Islamic practice revolves around a few central rituals which are often slightly transformed versions of pre-Islamic Yao rituals. Most important of these was the initiation ceremony for boys. By means of the introduction of complete rather than partial circumcision, and changing the name of the ceremony to *jando* (the term used on the coast), the Yao initiation ceremony in a largely unaltered form became a method of induction into Islam. The name of the initiation for girls was likewise altered.

The introduction of Sufism to the region in the early 1900s was given an enthusiastic reception by the Yao Muslims. The Qadiriya and Shadhiliya Sufi orders had both established themselves on the coast, and were adopted by a number of Yao sheikhs who had ventured to the coastal centres and who returned to propagate elements of Sufi practice among the Yao. The central ritual of the Sufis, the *dhikr* (or *sikiri* as the Yao refer to it), was swiftly incorporated by the Yao and replaced the performance of pre-Islamic dances at marriages, funerals and other ceremonies. As practised by the Yao, the performance of *sikiri* consists of a ring of dancers, usually with a core of young men, moving in unison around and around, bending and rising to expel and inhale breath. This can go on for quite a long time, certainly producing hyperventilation in the core performers.



So, through the agency of the sheikhs, the Yao were able to appropriate this rather attractive aspect of Sufism, and began to refer to themselves as followers of the *tariqa* (the Sufi way). Other elements of coastal Sufism - festivals like *ziyala*, the founder's anniversary, and the use of banners and flags - joined the *sikiri* in consolidating the appeal of the *tariqa*, and the authority of the sheikhs who propagated these practices was initially unchallenged. Those who had made the journey to the coast and particularly to Zanzibar were held in high regard and the title of sheikh or *mwaliimu* (teacher) was given rather freely to the ones that returned. Few of the Yao sheikhs of this first phase were literate in Arabic or made any pretensions to scholarship in Islamic doctrine. But they were very active in propagating their version of Islamic practice, and persuading chiefs and headmen to build mosques and set up *madrasas* at which children were taught how to pray, to recite the *Fatiha* (the opening section of the Quran), and other elements of this rudimentary Islamic way of life.<sup>1</sup> Above all, they urged the chiefs to resist the encroachment of the Christian missions which were always eager to open schools in the region, and in this they were aided by the policy of religious neutrality which the colonial administration maintained.

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<sup>1</sup>I should emphasise that in Malawi the term *madrasa* is used to include what are elsewhere called Quran schools. It denotes any institution where Islamic ideas and practices are taught but is usually applied to places where children are instructed by a *mwaliimu* (Muslim teacher).



That, then, is an outline of Phase One, of the appropriation and accommodation of Islam by the Yao, and until the 1930s it was entrenched more or less uniformly throughout the areas in which they were settled in southern Nyasaland. Then a series of conflicts developed among the Yao Muslims which reveal, I think, the emergence of Phase Two of my model - that is, of an internal reform movement. The controversies seem to have initially revolved around funerals, which is significant because the ceremonies associated with the burial of Yao Muslims were a rather striking instance of the accommodation of Islamic practice to pre-Islamic Yao custom. The feasts which follow the burial of a Yao adherent of the *tariqa* are known as *sadaqa* (an Arabic term usually denoting voluntary alms given by Muslims), and this term is also applied by the Yao to feasts commemorating their ancestors. A central feature of the *sadaqa* or funeral feast is the performance of *sikiri*. The *sukuti* movement, which first made its presence felt through its opposition to the performance of *sikiri* at funerals, soon gained a substantial following, including some influential sheikhs. It uses the Book rather than tradition as its referent and authority, and it opposes the accretions of the Islamic practice of Phase One, but it tends to do so negatively, by pointing to their supposed deviance, rather than by way of a positive doctrine. Nevertheless, the *sukuti* movement took root and has re-emerged in various disputes throughout the area since then, which often revolved around the performance of *sikiri*, but

also around such diverse issues as the legality of eating hippopotamus meat and the manner of prayer.

The description of the *sukuti* movement as "anti-Sufi" seems quite accurate. It emerged in opposition to the Sufi-influenced latitude of Phase One, but it remains dispersed and fragmented, both spatially and ideologically. Despite a tendency toward scripturalism and a more puritanical practice of Islam, there does not appear to be any unifying positive doctrine. It defines itself negatively, in opposition to the *tariqa* from which it emerges in response to a growing recognition of the significance of the Book. It also begins to undermine the Yao Muslim identity of Phase One in a way that the minor differences between followers of the Qadiriya and Shadhiliya never did.

The positive doctrine and ideological unity which the *sukuti* or internal reform movement of Phase Two lacked, to some extent creates the opening for the arrival of the new reformists. This third phase of the development of Islam among the Yao starts to make its presence felt in Malawi in the 1970s, and although its supporters are still few in number among the Yao Muslims, its influence has grown very rapidly. It has certainly benefited from the disarray and erosion of the ranks of the *tariqa* caused by the *sukutis*, and although the new reformists tend to look more favourably upon the Islamic practice of the *sukutis* than that of the *tariqa*, they don't seek an alliance with them. One of the slogans which was popular at meetings of the



reformist Muslim Students' Association underlines this: "No Qadiriya! No Sukutiya! Islamiya!" But with a strong central doctrine of scripturalism and a strategy to implement it, the new reformists have set about undermining rather than directly confronting both of the other factions.

They are supported in this by relatively large material resources - funds which flowed in from donors mostly in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. This is channelled through the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), an organisation which was founded in Blantyre in the 1940s by Muslims of Asian extraction, and which until recently had been of little consequence to the Yao Muslims. With the funds came people to administer them: a financial director from Kuwait and teachers from various parts of the Muslim world. The programme which the revived Muslim Association embarked on was directed mainly toward the provision of education for the Yao Muslim youth. Islamic centres with primary and secondary schools have been built, funds have been made available for Muslim pupils to attend these and also government schools, and scholarships have been set up to send selected students to Islamic colleges abroad. The policy of the post-independence Malawi government to detach the mission schools from the control of the churches and to open government schools in non-Christian areas has helped the cause of the new reformists considerably, since Yao Muslims are now less resistant to the idea of sending their children to school. The Muslim Students' Association (MSA), formed in 1982 and affiliated to the MAM, has been very

active in schools throughout the Muslim areas.

Significantly, the activities of the MSA were confined to schools rather than *madrasas*, limiting the possibility of conflict with local sheikhs.

The doctrine that the new reformists propagate is scripturalist in the extreme, privileging the Book as the ultimate source of authority and rejecting all Islamic practice which is not sanctioned by it. The strategy of enlisting the school-going youth and of using the growth of literacy in general to inculcate scripturalism seems to have been very effective, and this, combined with their material resources and links with the heart-lands of Islam, make the new reformists a very formidable force. It is clear that the new reformism, this third phase of Islamic transformation which threatens to eclipse the two earlier phases, is not in any simple sense an internal development. It depends upon the growing integration of Yao Muslims with the Muslim world at large, and upon factors external to Islam - in particular, changes in the education system in post-independence Malawi, and the facility of modern travel and communications. To suggest then that this represents some sort of logical outgrowth of the earlier phases seems perhaps to strain a little against the facts, to be more Hegelian than historical.

Up until the late 1970s, it seemed as though Islam among the Yao was in a state of dormancy if not atrophy. The sporadic conflicts between followers of the *tariqa* and the



*sukuti* had continued without resolution, gradually eroding the unity of the Yao Muslims. Yet it was just this divided condition of Islam in the region which gave the new reformists their opening, and which leads me to suggest that their success has been a logical outcome of emerging trends within the ranks of the Yao Muslims. The *sukuti* movement was able to place reform on the agenda, but operating within the horizons of the existing Islamic structures, it had neither the strategy nor the resources to effect a major transformation. The tendency towards reformism had to wait until the Yao were once again connected with the Muslim world to achieve its full effect.

The identity which the new reformists inculcate in their followers is one of belonging to a global Muslim movement. It is an outward-looking identity, entirely opposed to the introverted identity of the Yao Muslims of Phase One and Two. This difference in identity is marked in many ways and even appears in language usage. Where Yao spiced with a bit of Swahili was the language of the earlier phases, the new reformists use Chichewa (the official language of Malawi) or English at meetings, and employ Arabic greetings and formulae as much as they are able to. Above all, it is the aim of those committed to the reformist movement to go abroad and study in an Islamic state and acquire Arabic. Literacy in Arabic is very rare in Malawi but it is now the aspiration of many ambitious young Muslims, and it is most desirable if it is acquired somewhere close to the Middle East. Within the limits of their situation as part of a

Muslim minority in a state where they are viewed with some suspicion, the new reformists are trying to forge an identity which is based on a model of Islamic practice very different to that of their Muslim predecessors in the region.

Looking at the emergence of the phases of Islam which I have outlined in terms of their relationship with the Book, there is a shift from a situation in which the Book is largely effaced to one in which it is central. It was taken on board in the first phase as part of a ritual system in which it was useful and docile. In the second phase it begins to assert itself, exerting an influence which is corrosive of the accretions of the first phase, without yet being able to impose itself convincingly. And in the third phase, taking advantage both of the ground which had been prepared for it by the action of the first two phases and of conditions generally conducive to scripturalism, the Book begins to assume a position of centrality and authority. The increasing prominence of the Book is accompanied by a changing identity, from a situation where Islamic practice is used to bolster a tribal identity to one where it provides access to an international movement. The Yao Muslims have been changed. The Islamic practice which they adopted and made their own has been transformed, and their identity has been transformed with it. The growth of scripturalism has been followed by the demise of a tribal identity and the emergence of a new wholly Muslim identity. Islam, which once enabled the Yao to sustain a



tribal identity, has now furnished them with an entirely new identity. The Yao who once appropriated Islam are now being appropriated by it.

## PART TWO

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### THE STORY OF THE YAO MUSLIMS

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## 6

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## THE 'PROPER' YAO

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In the course of my fieldwork I had an often-repeated experience which usually took the form of a response to my efforts to learn the Yao language. People would be surprised and delighted that I had chosen to learn Yao rather than Chewa (which with English is the national language and the one that expatriates usually try to learn), but they would inform me that they did not themselves speak the language correctly, and that they were not in fact the 'proper' Yao. This would sometimes be followed by a suggestion that if I really wanted to learn about the Yao I should go elsewhere, often naming one or other place in the general direction of northern Mozambique. Thus, in Mangochi town I was told to go to Makanjila's or Namwera, both near the Mozambique border. But when I eventually did arrive in Makanjila's I was told that I still had not found the real thing and that if I wanted to speak Yao properly - if I wanted to find the

'pure' Yao - I would have to go even further, across the border into Mozambique.

At the time I was more amused than disconcerted by these repeated attempts to persuade me to seek out the 'proper' Yao. The sort of ethnography that I intended to pursue did not depend on a notion of tribal or ethnic authenticity, and it was not my intention to track down representatives of an ideal version of the Yao, especially not at risk to my life in Mozambique. I suspect that even had I crossed the border and ventured towards that region which is generally regarded as the homeland of the Yao, my search would have been endless. The 'proper' Yao, like the eponymous hill from which they are supposed to have sprung, seem to be elusive by nature and I was content to leave them that way.

It was only after my return from Malawi that I began to consider the possible significance of all this upon discovering in conversation with Clyde Mitchell that he had experienced the same sort of disclaimers while doing fieldwork among the Yao some forty years earlier. At first glance it seems a rather paradoxical situation, that the notion that a group of 'proper' Yao exist somewhere is quite widely held but that the people holding this belief identify themselves as Yao while at the same time disqualifying themselves from membership of the exemplary group. What seems important for those who identify themselves as Yao in Malawi is the idea that somewhere



there is a sort of pristine core of the tribe which is a repository of an ideal language and culture of the Yao. To the extent that the Yao in Malawi can be said to have a tribal identity, this identity involves the notion of an ideal version of the tribe and a recognition of their own detachment from that ideal.<sup>1</sup>

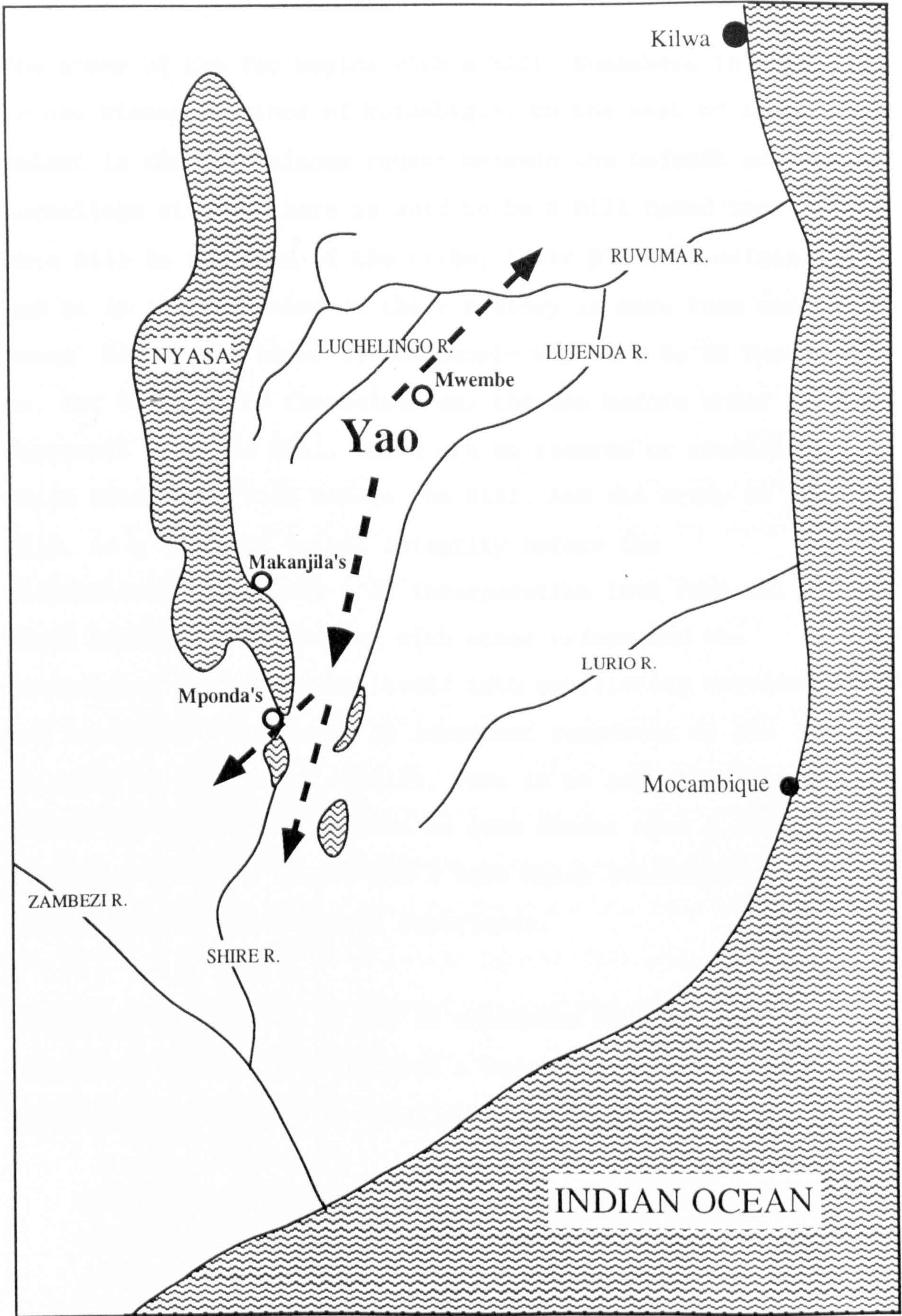
The question of the invention or creation of tribes and tribalism in central and southern Africa has received a good deal of attention in recent years, but much of the discussion has been about how tribes were invented by outsiders - missionaries, colonial administrators and even anthropologists.<sup>2</sup> It may however be useful to explore the extent to which the Yao invented themselves, rather than assuming that any sense of tribal identity they may have is a sort of false consciousness imposed on them by outsiders. There is no doubt that an idea of what it is to be Yao has existed and continues to exist among people who in some way identify themselves as Yao, and it may be that a venture into the history of 'the Yao' as an ethnographic concept will cast some light on the paradoxical identity - Yao but not 'proper' Yao - of my informants. An understanding of the formation of a Yao tribal identity is of importance too for an analysis of the development of Islam in the region, as subsequent chapters will reveal.

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<sup>1</sup>I have generally used the term 'tribe' to describe the Yao, preferring it to other possible terms like 'ethnic group' which, as Leach (1987: 1) pointed out, tend to be euphemistic or clumsy.

<sup>2</sup>A point of view taken by several of the contributions in the recent book edited by Leroy Vail (1989). Southall (1970) raised many of the same issues quite some time ago.





Map 3: East Central Africa in the nineteenth century, indicating direction of Yao migrations.



The story of the Yao begins with a hill. Somewhere in what is now Niassa Province of Mozambique, to the east of Lake Malawi in the mountainous region between the Lujenda and Luchelingo rivers, there is said to be a hill named Yao. This hill is the home of the tribe, their place of origin, and it is the beginning of their history in more than one sense. Nothing is known of the people who came to be known as, and to refer to themselves as, the Yao before their dispersal from the hill. There are no records or traditions which describe a life before the hill. And the story of the hill, of a state of tribal integrity before the vicissitudes of history - of incorporation into regional trade networks and conflict with other tribes and the division of the Yao tribe itself into conflicting sections and chiefdoms - is itself an important component of the identity of the Yao as a tribe. That is to say, the history of the Yao as a tribe depends to some extent upon a sense of tribal unity, a centre and a root which overrides the differences of their actual experience.

The story of the hill is not an elaborate one, and my informants uniformly reproduced a version similar to the following one of Yohanna Abdallah:

We ourselves say that the name of our race is 'the Yaos'. This means that we are they who sprang from the hill 'Yao', we are 'of Yao'; and thence are derived all who can claim to be Yaos. This hill Yao is situated in the area between Mwembe and the Luchilingo River (the range), extending from Wisulu through Lisombe, where Malinganile used to dwell, as far as Likopolwe,



and up to Mkuya, - that is Yao. Further the word 'Yao' refers to a hill, treeless and grassgrown. (1919: 7)

What is striking about Abdallah's account, and that of my informants, is that the hill Yao is referred to in a matter of fact way, as though there really is a hill named Yao, located in northern Mozambique. Writers such as Sanderson and Rangeley, who spent many years in the region and travelled widely in it, also appear to regard it as a real place, but neither claim to have visited it. So, is there really a hill Yao? None of my informants claimed to have been to Yao hill, and there is no record of any European traveller or missionary claiming to have positively identified the hill.

A clue perhaps to the resolution of this puzzle, of the hill which exists in a real space but which cannot be located, is in the name of the hill itself. The word *yao* is a plural form of *chao*, a treeless place, usually a hill. But the word *chao* is not used to describe the hill which is the home of the tribe - it is the plural form which is used in this context.<sup>1</sup> One is tempted to conclude that the hill Yao may in fact be more than one hill. This is given some support by a note on the Yao homeland in the *Nyasa News*:

Some months ago we were asked by the Commissioner 'Where is the Yao home?' and I do not know that any of us felt inclined to dogmatize on the subject in answer to the query.... Probably

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<sup>1</sup>Rangeley in fact refers to the hill as 'Chao' (1963: 8), but Sanderson (1954: 30), like Abdallah and my own informants, explicitly gives the plural form 'Yao' as the name of the hill.

the Yaos were from the first, or at least as far back as it is possible to trace them, a people who lived, as they do now, not all on one mountain range, or set of hills, but on this and that great fortress-hill, under separate chiefs. If however we were asked to pick out one mountain of which we could say that Yaos have been known to inhabit it longer than we could say the same of any other Yao-land fastnesses, we should certainly fix on Mtonya. We remember asking Yaos at Newala at least 15 years ago, the same question the Commissioner asked us, and their answer was, for whatever it may be worth, - Mtonya.<sup>1</sup>

It may be that Mtonya is the hill Yao, but that seems unlikely. After all, the name of the hill is Yao. The hill from which the Yao take their name, to which indeed they owe their existence, has itself an elusive and ambiguous nature. The hill Yao is neither in any simple sense a real hill, in a real topographical space, nor on the other hand merely a mythical entity.<sup>2</sup> The moment it is approached, it dissolves into the myriad of hills and mountains in the region. At this point where myth and history merge in the shape of a hill there is an essential obscurity, an ontological puzzle which is reflected in the nature of the identity of the tribe. From comments of W.P. Johnson, who perhaps knew the Yao more extensively and intimately than any of his contemporary missionaries, it would seem likely that the term Yao simply means 'hill people' - those who come from the hills - which accords well enough with the account of Yao origins given by Abdallah and others:

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<sup>1</sup>The Nyasa News (6), November 1894, 206.

<sup>2</sup>David Parkin, in his account of the sacred spaces of the Giriamas, indicates that this ambiguity may not be unusual: "There are many ethnic groups throughout the world who define themselves by reference to a fixed centre which only a minority of them live in or have ever visited. If such centres do not exist, it becomes imperative that at some stage they have to be invented." (1991: 9).



Thence to the Rovuma the country is cut by deep streams, and crowned by mountains 2000 to 5000 ft in height, held by Yao chiefs. Here is the cradle or eyrie of the Yao (Hyao) people, and their inaccessible refuge. It is the home of the east wind, and a name of contempt, Angulu, given them by the Lake people, is turned to mean the people swept down from the hills by this wind, as the leaves come in autumn. Certainly they often look as if they had come down quick enough, conspicuous with weather worn face, keen eye, long powder horn and longer belt, wound round and round, and little else but muscle and gun.<sup>1</sup>

The history of the Yao in the sense of some sort of narrative of events can only be reconstructed after their departure from the hill. Abdallah writes of the scattering of the Yao as follows: "What caused them to scatter in every direction from the hill called Yao is more than we can understand now. It may be that our ancestors quarrelled among themselves and separated, some going one way and others another, so that we now inhabit different countries." (1919: 8). He enumerates ten sub-tribes or sections of the Yao, each of which took its name from the place to which it moved after the dispersal from the hill Yao. Of these, three are significantly represented in Malawi: "The *Amasanninga* are those who went to live near the hill Lisaninga, near the Lutwesi River. ...Others went to live near the Mandimba hills - the *Amachinga*, so named from the word *lichinga* meaning a ridge with a serrated outline. ... The *Amangoche*, at Mangoche Hill." (Ibid.: 9).

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<sup>1</sup>The *Nyasa News* (2) November 1893, 55-56.



These sections of the Yao dispersed further, and their movements and transformations can begin to be traced in the records of travellers and missionaries as well as in their own accounts. The picture now starts to come into a sharper historical focus. The chiefs and dynasties which came to prominence, the wars and migrations, the involvement in the slave trade and contacts with Europeans, all this can be pieced together to throw light on the subsequent history of the Yao. The question of whether the Yao really did exist as such in some golden age prior to their dispersal is one which it is impossible to answer but I suspect that, like the hill, the Yao were not one but many. Such identity as they may have had was, like the unity of the hill, a fabrication in the sense of being something that was worked out over time rather than being something given.

At the end of the 18th century the Yao emerge as the main conduit of goods between the interior of east central Africa and the coast. The traveller Lacerda who ventured to the interior in 1798, noted:

The dry goods hitherto imported into this country have been brought by the Mujao (Wahiao), indirectly or directly, from the Arabs of Zanzibar and its vicinity. Hence these people receive all the ivory exported from the possessions of the Cazembe, whereas formerly it passed in great quantities through our port of Mozambique. (Burton, 1873: 37)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>There is a great deal of variation in the terms used by early writers for Yao: Mujao, Wahiao and Ajawa are the most common.

Burton comments on this observation that the trade went through Kilwa, which seems indeed to have been the case, but that "the Wahiao [Yao] tribe has been so favoured in the slave-market that it is now nearly extinct" (Ibid.: 37), which was certainly not the case but gives an indication of the extent to which the Yao had become victims as well as participants of the slave trade. Burton, who visited Kilwa in the late 1850s, expands on these comments elsewhere: "The market is supplied chiefly by the tribes living about the Nyassa Lake, the Wahiao, as I have said, being preferred to all others, and some may march for a distance of 4000 miles." (Burton, 1872: 347).

Burton's visit to Kilwa also turned up a curious suggestion of a much earlier Yao presence there. On a trip to the island, Kilwa Kisiwani, which until it was replaced by Kilwa Kivinje on the nearby mainland at the end of the 18th century was the regional commercial centre, he found inhabitants of the island who claimed descent from the Yao: "In view of the ruins they recounted to us their garbled legendary history. The Island was originally inhabited by the Wahiao savages, from whom the present race partly descends, and Songo Mnara [the nearby island] was occupied by the Wadubuki, a Moslem clan." (Burton, 1872: 361). It is difficult to know quite what to make of this, but it does indicate at least a long presence of the Yao in the area, possibly pre-dating the shift of Kilwa from Kisiwani to Kivinje. This is reinforced by yet another observation made by Burton: "The 'Bisha ivory' formerly found its way to the



Mozambique, but the barbarians have now learned to prefer Zanzibar; and the citizens welcome them, as they sell their stores more cheaply than the Wahiao, who have become adepts in coast arts." (Burton, 1961: 412). What this indicates is not only that the Yao had been involved in trade for quite some time, but also the confidence and skill with which they dealt with the coast.

But how did the trade begin? How does one jump from Yao hill and the pristine tribe to the situation which begins to take historical definition in the mid-nineteenth century, of accomplished slave and ivory traders, travelling to the coast and selling off their less fortunate neighbours. The historian Edward Alpers (1969: 406) follows Abdallah (1919: 11) and accepts his rather convoluted tale of the Chisi blacksmiths, a Yao clan who are supposed to have set up an internal network of trade which gradually extended to the coast at Kilwa. There is little additional evidence on this point and, as another historian points out, the somewhat uncritical stance which Alpers displays on this question may well have something to do with trends in African historiography at that time - an enthusiasm, in short, for 'African initiative' (Sheriff, 1987: 155).

It is simply impossible to reconstruct with any certainty exactly when and how the Yao became involved with trade at the coast. Alpers (1969: 406) suggests that it was well established by 1616, when Gaspar Bocarro travelled from

Tete to Kilwa, passing through the regions where the Yao are now settled, but in fact there is nothing in the record of Bocarro's journey to confirm this conjecture. It does seem that there was some trade with the coast from this area at the time, but there is no evidence that people who identified themselves as Yao were involved in it (cf. Bocarro, 1975: 166-167). It may be that the Yao simply did not exist as such at the time, or on the other hand that they were not yet active in long-distance trade and Bocarro's route passed them by. Rangeley claims that the Yao were trading between Kilwa and the Congo basin by 1768, a suggestion which is based more persuasively on Portuguese records that actually mention the Yao by name (1963: 7-9). This appears to be the earliest documented evidence of the existence of the Yao and their involvement in long-distance trading, though as Rangeley notes it seems likely that they must have been accustomed to travel and trade for some while before this. The means by which the Yao became incorporated into the trade have to remain a matter of conjecture.

What can be stated with some certainty is that by the early nineteenth century there was a very well established trade in ivory and slaves between the Yao and the coast at Kilwa. There is however little indication of the situation of the Yao in the interior until the arrival of Livingstone. He encountered the Yao first as slave-raiders on the upper Shire River in the course of the Zambesi expedition of 1859, but his most illuminating descriptions of the Yao



come from the journals of his journey up the Rovuma in 1866. On that journey he passed through several Yao chiefdoms and with the assistance of the two Yao boys in his party was able to collect a great deal of information about the people on the way: "Chimseia, Chimsaka, Mtarika, Mtende, Makanjela, Mataka, and all the chiefs and people in our route to the Lake, are Waiyau, or Waiau." (Waller [1], 1874: 67). Coming towards Mwembe, the town of one of the most powerful Yao slaving chiefs, Livingstone found to his cost that the trade with the coast was so well established by this time that it was difficult to tempt the people with his goods: "In the route along the Rovuma, we pass among people so well supplied with white calico by the slave-trade from Kilwa, that it is quite a drug in the market: we cannot get food for it." (Ibid.: 61). And further on: "...all are so well supplied with everything by slave-traders that we have difficulty in getting provisions at all. Mataka has plenty of all kinds of food." (Ibid.: 69). His description of Mataka and the town reveals further evidence of the extent of trade with the coast:

We found Mataka's town situated in an elevated valley, surrounded by mountains; the houses numbered at least 1000, and there were many villages around. ... Mataka kept us waiting some time on the verandah of his large square house, and then made his appearance ... He is about sixty years of age, dressed as an Arab ... He had never seen any but Arabs before. He gave me a square house to live in, indeed the most of the houses here are square, for the Arabs are imitated in everything ... (Ibid.: 72-73)

According to Abdallah, Mataka's town Mwembe was designed to resemble the coastal towns. He attributes the following sentiments to Mataka: "Ah! now I have changed Yao so that it resembles the coast, and the sweet fruits of the coast now I will eat in my own home; this place is no longer Mloi but its name is now Mwembe, where I have planted the mango (mwembe) of the coast." (1919: 51). The Mwembe which Livingstone visited in July of 1866 had however recently been relocated as a result of attacks by the 'Mazitu', and despite the prosperity which he found in some places, there was also plenty of evidence of war and upheaval. This seems partly to have been a result of the marauding parties of Mazitu (Ngoni) and Walolo, but mainly of competition among Yao chiefs for slaves. While Livingstone was at Mwembe he found that one of the neighbouring Yao chiefs was kidnapping and selling Mataka's people, and further towards the lake he found evidence of plundering for slaves by a woman chief of the Masaninga Yao, Njelenje (Waller [1], 1874: 78ff).

In general, though, the Yao chiefdoms which were actively participating in the slave trade had turned their attention to the Mang'anja to the south of the lake. The parties of Yao slavers which Livingstone had met in 1859 were only the vanguard of a general movement of the Yao south-west towards the Shire highlands. Sometimes fugitives, sometimes raiders, groups of Yao were moving into what is now southern Malawi in a migration which has ghostly echoes in the present time. Livingstone's analysis of the cause and



manner of the migration is worth looking at in some detail. It is more charitable to the Yao than some of the other missionary accounts, but is probably quite accurate:

A migratory afflatus seems to have come over the Ajawa [Yao] tribes. Wars among themselves, for the supply of the Coast slave-trade, are said to have first set them in motion. The usual way in which they have advanced among the Mang'anja has been by slave-trading in a friendly way. Then, professing to wish to live as subjects, they have been welcomed as guests, and the Mang'anja, being great agriculturalists, have been able to support considerable bodies of these visitors for a time. When provisions became scarce, the guests began to steal from the fields; quarrels arose in consequence, and, the Ajawa having firearms, their hosts got the worst of it, and were expelled from village after village, and out of their own country. The Mang'anja were quite as bad in regard to slave-trading as the Ajawa, but had less enterprise, and were much more fond of the home pursuits of spinning, weaving, smelting iron, and cultivating the soil, than of foreign travel. The Ajawa had little of a mechanical turn, and not much love for agriculture, but were very keen traders and travellers.  
(Livingstone, 1865: 497)

Dr John Kirk, a member of the Zambesi expedition, tersely described the havoc which the Yao had wrought on the Mang'anja in 1862: "Up the Shire there is famine and war. Hunger has killed whole villages, while war is on every hand. The Ajawa have occupied the hill country and have even crossed the Shire, perhaps on the way to Tette."  
(Foskett [II], 1965: 493). The easy pickings which Yao slaving parties had found in their forays up and across the Shire may have encouraged others to move and settle there. They certainly met with very little resistance, and the

access of the Yao to firearms seems to have been decisive in their encounters with the Mang'anja. Some of the Yao seem to have been well supplied with weapons as Livingstone found when he met with a party in the village of a Mang'anja chief: "... and found there a large party of Ajawa - Waiau, they called themselves - all armed with muskets." (1865: 496). Twenty years later Duff Macdonald was surprised at the wide-spread possession of firearms among the Yao on the Shire highlands: "The men go armed generally with guns. (The country is full of flint muskets marked the 'Tower', and introduced by the slave trade.)" (1882: 19). Procter, a member of the ill-fated UMCA mission at Magomero, was impressed by the fighting tactics of the Yao in 1861: "... the Ajawa appear to be a very good set of fighting men, firing their guns and arrows, and then hiding behind trees, with great dexterity ... " (Bennet & Ylvisaker, 1971: 93).

It is clear that the dominance which the Yao came to have in the region was due to their contact with the coast, their involvement in the slave trade and their access to and skill in using firearms (Jhala, 1982). It is also apparent that by the middle of the nineteenth century they were organised into autonomous chiefdoms, some of which were stronger in a military sense than others, but all of which seem to have been quite mobile. What is not at all clear is how long this state of affairs had persisted. The suggestion of Alpers (1969: 407), that it was their involvement in the slave trade which led to an enlargement



of the significant political unit from village to chiefdom is plausible but difficult to verify. However, the fact that none of the chiefly dynasties which were prominent at the end of the nineteenth century extended back for more than a couple of generations does give some indication that these chiefdoms were a relatively new phenomenon.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century, the Yao begin to come into a still sharper focus, thanks to the reports of Livingstone and other travellers, and in particular to the growing friction between the Yao and the missionary interests in the region. The picture which develops is that of several chiefdoms with well-established trade links with the coast, increasingly involved in the slave trade and often in competition with one-another. Situated in the upper basin of the Rovuma they had been well placed to take advantage of the trade between Kilwa and the interior, and their mountainous homeland had given them some protection from other marauding and predatory tribes. There was no central power, no 'paramount chief', but a series of more or less powerful chiefs, sometimes in alliance and sometimes in opposition, something like a group of warlords. The authority of the chiefs appears to have rested largely on their ability to conduct trade with the coast and to muster men and slaves in pursuit of this trade. As for the migrations into southern Malawi which Livingstone and the vanguard of the UMCA witnessed, it may in part be ascribed to attacks on the Yao by rival tribes and to squabbling between Yao chiefs, but it would seem

that many of the slaving parties which they encountered were not so much fugitives but well-organised and disciplined marauders from the powerful chiefdoms come to take slaves for the coast. Those who settled in southern Malawi were on the one hand less-powerful Yao escaping from their more powerful competitors and, on the other hand, chiefs like Makanjila who simply wanted to be nearer to the best pickings.

What is also clear from descriptions at the time is that, despite the competition between chiefdoms, the Yao had a well-defined identity. This was not some sort of spurious identity imposed upon them by outsiders. They regarded themselves as Yao and they were clearly distinguished in a political and economic sense from other people in the region despite the evident disunity within their own ranks. They were traders and slavers, the followers of powerful chiefs, and unmistakable as such whether settled or on the move. Where they had settled among the Mang'anja near to the lake, their villages were visibly different, as Livingstone found: "We passed one village of the latter [Mang'anja] near this, a sad, tumble-down affair, while the Waiyau [Yao] villages are very neat, with handsome straw or reed fences all round their huts." (Waller [1], 1874: 112). Procter wrote of the pattern of settlement of the Yao in 1862, describing a situation which has persisted from then until the present:

It appears that the Ajawa run in a long line from Zomba between this and the Shire, with a branch out here and there among the



Mang'anja, who extend along on either side. It is easy to see hence that between the two quarrels should often arise, especially when the Ajawa occupy the land of a weak but jealous people like the Mang'anja, though at other times a sort of toleration state of peace might exist between them. (Bennet & Ylvisaker, 1971: 190)

The Yao seem to have quickly established their dominance over their neighbours wherever they moved in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and the situation which was described south of the lake was also found to the north-east by the traveller Joseph Thomson: "There are many colonies of Wahyao all along the Rovuma, and wherever they have settled they have become the chief power of the district." (Thomson, 1882: 78). Virtually every description of the Yao from this time, including those of the missionaries who often found themselves in opposition to the Yao chiefs, emphasises their political dominance and evident superiority over the other people in the region. Thus Thomson praised them in the following extravagant terms: "The Wahyao are perhaps without exception the most industrious and energetic people to be found in East Africa, rivalling the Wanyamwesi in these particulars and excelling them in intelligence and trading capabilities." (Ibid.: 77). This seems also to have been the perception of the Yao themselves, at least in Abdallah's record of it: "That was the awakening of our fathers of old, and that was the time when the Yaos began to become civilized, to go ahead, in care of the person, in dress, and cleanliness; in knowledge and wisdom; and to consider that the Yaos were

superior to all other races." (Abdallah, 1919: 34). Their involvement in the slave trade and contacts with the coast appear to have given the Yao not only a political and economic advantage in the region, but also to have led to the development of a sort of tribal jingoism which manifested itself even in the case of those who had been enslaved by their fellow Yao, as the following anecdote about Livingstone's guide indicates: "Chuma, for instance, believes now that he was caught and sold by the Mang'anja, and not by his own Waiyau, though it was just in the opposite way that he became a slave ... but this showed that he was determined to justify his countrymen at any rate." (Waller [1], 1874: 120).

The Yao were distinct from their neighbours not only in political and economic terms. There were linguistic and cultural differences which tended to set them apart and which appeared to have unusual uniformity across the various sections and chiefdoms of the Yao. Their language was one with which the missionaries soon began to grapple, and found not only that it was dissimilar from many of the surrounding languages, but also that by comparison with some of the other languages in the region, there was very little variation in dialect. The Yao spoken on the Shire highlands differed very little from that spoken in Mwembe or near to the coast. The conclusion was that this resulted from the disposition of the Yao to travel, bringing all parts of the tribe into frequent contact: "Attention has often been drawn, and lately again by ourselves, to the



fact that whereas in Chinyanja dialectic changes are somewhat prominent, in Yao there are scarcely any, and the reason for this has often been attributed with precision to the well-known love of travel that seems to be in-born in every Yao, leading to constant contact between even remote offshoots of the tribe."<sup>1</sup> The Church of Scotland missionary Alexander Hetherwick compiled an introductory text on the Yao language and had a similar view: "The Yao has a fondness for travel. Almost every young man has made one or more journeys to the coast, while some are described as *lwendelwendope*, wanderers. The different branches of the tribe have in this way been frequently brought in contact with each other, and we find but few instances of dialectic variety." (Hetherwick, 1902: xix). Sanderson (1954) maintains much the same opinion in the preface to his dictionary of the Yao language fifty years later, as does the linguist Whiteley (1966) in his study of the language.

The lack of variation in the Yao language may certainly have been partly due to the 'fondness for travel' of its speakers, although it could also indicate that their dispersal from their hill (or hills) was relatively recent. As my experience of trying to learn Yao would suggest, there is now more perceived variation from an exemplary dialect among speakers of the language, which may have to do both with a further time lapse and the difficulty in travel across international borders. Whatever the reason, though, the integrity of the language at the time served

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<sup>1</sup>The *Nyasa News* (2) November 1893, 64.

to reinforce perceptions of the Yao as a unique social entity. The comments of a UMCA missionary on the question of language in education in Nyasaland are revealing:

Blantyre is some forty miles distant from Zomba, yet the Yaos of Blantyre and Zomba speak absolutely the same language - so do those of Mlanje - so those of Chikala, twenty miles further on, - so do those of the Upper River (Liwonde's). It is only when you go to Makanjila's and Mataka's that the differences in dialect are at all prominent. Even from as far distant a station as Newala we hear that the Yao of Zomba is very near to the Yao spoken at that place. Here then we have so called tribes of Yaos united by their common language into what we might term a nation.<sup>1</sup>

This theme of the Yao, dispersed and fragmented into sections and chiefdoms as they were, being nevertheless united by their language and culture into a 'nation' is one that was taken up by British colonial officials in their attempts to find suitable agents of indirect rule several decades later, as Vail and White found (1989: 168-171). In that context it tended to become a spurious and even sinister notion, but the sense of identity which linguistic and cultural similarity maintained in quite distant branches of the Yao was not in any simple sense an external construct. It was certainly an advantage towards the end of the nineteenth century to be a Yao in southern Nyasaland, since the Yao chiefs and their followers had a virtual monopoly in the region on trade links with the coast, and even after the end of the slave trade the Yao still tended

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<sup>1</sup>The Nyasa News (8) May 1895, 245.



to be regarded and treated as the dominant African group in the region.

A common language and ideas of a shared origin along with a unique position in the developing political economy of the region might have contributed to the formation of a distinct Yao identity in the nineteenth century, but the means by which access to this identity was controlled were primarily those of ritual, and in particular initiation rituals. One of the distinctive elements of the Yao initiation for boys was noted by Livingstone at Mwembe:

The men are large, strong-boned fellows, and capable of enduring great fatigue, they undergo a rite which once distinguished the Jews about the age of puberty, and take a new name on the occasion; this was not introduced by the Arabs, whose advent is a recent event, and they speak of the time before they were inundated with European manufactures in exchange for slaves, as quite within their memory. (Waller [1], 1874: 81)

The role of initiation and circumcision in the spread of Islam will be described in the following chapter, but it is important to note that the Yao initiation ritual was distinctive in the region - in that it involved a sort of circumcision as well as in other respects - and that then as now it was the prerequisite to becoming a Yao. The new Yao settlers on the Shire highlands were not long in getting initiations under way, as Procter found in 1861: "The ceremony of the Mwali among our Ajawa people began today. It is the admission of young people to the state of

Manhood and Womanhood, during which they are called 'Namwali'." (Bennet & Ylvisaker, 1971: 150). A couple of decades later Macdonald found that male slaves taken by the Yao were also being initiated according to their custom: "The Anyasa do not make their males go through this ceremony; but an Anyasa slave taken by the Wayao is put through it even if he is an old man and married." (Macdonald, 1882 [1]: 131). It does not appear to have been very difficult to become a Yao - the main thing was to undergo the initiation ceremony - but this requirement was (and still is) taken very seriously. One of my informants from near Zomba who has a Yao mother and a Lomwe father said that only if he were to undergo the Yao initiation would he be considered - and would consider himself - to be a Yao.

The initiation ceremonies were under the control of chiefs and headmen and they were thus the gatekeepers of Yao identity. There were of course alternative routes to becoming a Yao - for instance, the children of women who became slaves and concubines, who would in due course be initiated even if their mothers were not. But being conquered or enslaved was not the most desirable way of becoming a Yao. The Makanjila chiefly dynasty is said to have come from non-Yao stock, and this was also the case with several other of the trading chiefs of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that, having gathered together a

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<sup>1</sup>One of my informants at Mpilipili - a senior sheikh whose accounts of other aspects of the history of the chiefdom have proved very reliable - gave me a slightly different account of the first



substantial body of followers the point of entry to becoming a Yao was reasonably flexible. It also seems that Arab and Swahili traders and their offspring had no difficulty in being accepted by the Yao, and in fact in becoming part of the Yao trading elite. So there does not seem to have been much in the way of 'primordial sentiment' in the formation of a Yao tribal boundary - the point of access was very clear: to be a Yao you had to undergo an initiation ritual. You didn't have to have a Yao ancestor, or belong to a Yao clan, or have a Yao name, or even have to be a fluent speaker of the Yao language. In fact, just about anybody could become a Yao as long as they underwent the initiation ritual. This is why the initiation rituals, as we shall see in the following chapter, were pivotal in conversion to Islam and in the further elaboration of Yao tribal identity.

To the extent that it is possible to be sure about these things it would seem that Yao tribal identity was not something that sprang fully clad from the hill, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. It was something that developed over time, in response to changing circumstances in the 17th century and onwards. More specifically in response to incorporation into what may be described as the Indian Ocean sector of the expanding world economic system. It certainly does not seem to have emerged from 'primordial' attachments, or even from any great confluence of interest or uniformity of social and political experience. It seems

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Makanjila's origins than that of Abdallah, claiming that Makanjila I came from near Monkey Bay and was a Manganja who married a Yao.

rather to have emerged from an apparent though flexible cultural and linguistic unity, along with a well-defined and carefully controlled point of access in the initiation rituals.

The circumstances leading to large-scale conversions to Islam in the late nineteenth century will be explored in the next chapter, and although there was certainly a complex interplay of factors at work in these conversions, it seems to me that the two conditions which are at the foundation of why and how the Yao opted for Islam are those which have been outlined in this chapter. The one is the emergence of a sense of tribal identity with boundaries and membership criteria which were visible and fairly easy to control. The other is the transformation of the regional political economy and the growing conflict with the British over the slave trade. I have tried to show in this chapter why it seems necessary to use some sort of concept of tribe as a unit of analysis in looking at Yao conversions to Islam, and to indicate what a tribe consists of in this context. In other words, although I have not taken it for granted that the Yao are a tribe, or that their conversion to Islam must be understood in terms of the mass conversion of a tribe or ethnic group, my exploration of the relevant historical material has persuaded me that it would be disingenuous and even misleading to attempt to treat the people who became Muslims in this region as if they did not come from an identifiable and definable group which may best be described as a tribe.



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## CONVERSION TO ISLAM

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No positive religion that has moved men has been able to start with a tabula rasa, and express itself as if religion were beginning for the first time; in form, if not in substance, the new system must be in contact all along the line with the older ideas and practices which it finds in possession. A new scheme of faith can find a hearing only by appealing to religious instincts and susceptibilities that already exist in its audience, and it cannot reach these without taking account of the traditional forms in which all religious feeling is embodied, and without speaking a language which men accustomed to those old forms can understand.

W. Robertson Smith

There is something mysterious and intractable about religious conversion, in groups of people perhaps even more than in individuals. Cardinal Newman compared the acquisition of religious faith to the lemma in which a regular polygon inscribed in a circle, its sides being continually diminished, approaches but never quite coincides with the circle (1947: 243). The jump from polygon to circle, from a convergence of probabilities to certitude in religious faith, is difficult to imagine for

the sceptical mind to which Newman addressed himself, but far more difficult is the task of reconstructing the forms of reasoning that went on in the minds of people for whom the Word arrived not in the guise of subtle and elegant argument but represented in diverse and sometimes violent manifestations. There is however a notable attempt to do just this for the converts to Christianity and Islam in Africa. Robin Horton's theory of conversion sets out explain the processes through which the two great monotheistic religions were adopted by societies throughout Africa. Horton's first statement of his theory (1971) sparked off a lively and at times heated debate on the subject which it is worth examining a little here, raising as it does some questions about the nature of explanation in the sociology of religion which are pertinent to my analysis of Yao conversion to Islam.

Horton begins with the idea of a typical or 'basic' African cosmology which is a two-tiered structure, the first tier being that of lesser spirits and the second that of a supreme being. The lesser spirits underpin events and processes in the microcosm of the local community and its environment, while the supreme being underpins events and processes in the wider world or macrocosm. In the 'pre-modern' world the daily life of individuals was largely contained within the microcosm and was administered by the lesser spirits. However, with the growth in trade, with state formation, and with the imposition of colonial rule, the boundaries of the microcosm broke down and most people



became in some way involved with aspects of the macrocosm. Given the association of the lesser spirits with the microcosm, and that of the supreme being with the macrocosm, the growth in the importance of the affairs of the macrocosm in the lives of individuals should, according to Horton, lead to an elaboration of the concepts and practices concerned with the supreme being, and the weakening of those associated with the lesser spirits. This increasing prominence of the supreme being paves the way for the success of Islam and Christianity in Africa. As Horton puts it, they "become catalysts for changes that were 'in the air' anyway" (1975: 220).

This theory of conversion which Horton styles the 'intellectualist theory' evoked a contribution from H.J.Fisher (1973), an Islamicist who suggested a different approach - which I will outline shortly - to the question of conversion at least where Islam was concerned. Horton responded by defending his own theory, and attacking Fisher's approach in a rather curious manner, claiming that, "In his reluctance to provide an overall causal explanation for what he takes to be a basic process of religious change Fisher resembles many other committed Christian scholars engaged in the study of African religious life." (1975: 396). Horton described these writers as the 'Devout Opposition', and included Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner among their ranks. There is a certain irony in all this, which stems from the fact that the first publication of Horton's theory coincided with the

publication by Monica Wilson, another 'committed Christian scholar', of a book containing a very similar theory of conversion to that of Horton. Horton subsequently acknowledged the similarity of their positions, but suggested that Wilson's interpretation tends to be functionalist by comparison with his own intellectualist approach (1975: 225n).<sup>1</sup> This digression into a slightly trivial byway of the history of ideas does in fact have a serious purpose here, for while there are aspects of Horton's theory which I find useful in looking at conversion, his enthusiasm for causal explanation leads him to a rather mechanistic theory of religious innovation as a sort of superstructural response to changes in the secular infrastructure of society. For Horton, religion is a reflective phenomenon, an explanatory system which mirrors social, political and economic formations. As Van Binsbergen (1981: 40) pointed out, there is a sort of one-way traffic between social structure and religion in Horton's theory, though as I suggested in the introductory section this is not unusual in the sociology of religion. A related problem with the 'intellectualist theory' is its focus on explanation and belief rather than practice, which blinds it to some of the more fundamental transformations which occur in the conversion process, especially in the case of Islam. Above all, Horton's theory deals with power very inadequately, and as Linares (1986) argues, this again

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<sup>1</sup>As it happens, the theory of conversion in Wilson's book (1971) is merely an elaboration of ideas about scale and social change that were published in collaboration with her husband Godfrey Wilson many years earlier (1945: 24ff), and of which Horton was presumably unaware when he developed his theory.



leads to a very incomplete and unsatisfactory analysis of the motives and processes leading to conversion. The reluctance which Horton identifies in the 'Devout Opposition' for causal explanation may, in short, simply be a result of their taking religion seriously. Too often causal explanation in the sociology of religion consists of reducing religion to a dependent variable of other spheres of social activity.

Fisher's approach on the other hand has been of more help to me in formulating an analysis of Yao conversion to Islam, and indeed as I indicated above, it has been a significant influence in general on my treatment of the development of Islam. Unlike Horton, for whom Islam and Christianity act primarily as catalysts for changes determined by non-religious forces, Fisher credits Islam with having a power for innovation with its own momentum and internal modes of development. He constructs a three-stage model of conversion to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa: The first stage he terms 'quarantine', the second 'mixing' and the third is that of 'reform'. Thus the first stage is that of initial contact with Islam as represented by traders or clerics moving into the area, but with little or no conversion. The second stage of 'mixing' occurs as the local population begins to convert to Islam in increasing numbers, combining the profession of Islam with pre-Islamic beliefs and practices. Finally, sometimes after a lapse of centuries, the 'candle of reform' - kept alight by the written word and the devotion of a few clerics - bursts

into conflagration and militant Islamic reform sweeps through the ranks of the converted (Fisher, 1985: 154ff). This model which, as I.M.Lewis (1980: viii) points out, is not dissimilar to Trimingham's diffusionist approach to the spread of Islam in Africa, seems to me to approximate to the processes through which the Yao have adopted Islam and to describe some of the main features of its influence on them.

In the previous chapter I showed how the Yao had become involved in trade with the coast by the end of the 17th century, and it is certain that their trading partners at the coast were Muslims - Swahili and Arabs. It also would seem that increasing numbers of these Muslims penetrated to the interior, firstly as part of slaving expeditions, and later also as scribes and advisors to some of the Yao chiefs. However, there is no indication of any significant number of Yao converts to Islam until the middle of the nineteenth century. There might have been some Yao slaves who converted to Islam at the coast, but although later on it would appear that the return of slave converts was a factor in facilitating the major conversions at the end of the nineteenth century, this does not seem to have been the case at this early stage of contact with the coast. It is important to note, therefore, that the Yao had been exposed to some form of Islamic influence for almost two hundred years before there were any significant conversions.



Nevertheless, short of actual declarations or professions of faith, it is certain that in this period of exposure to Muslims the Yao adopted some of the material culture and the customs of their trading partners at the coast. Abdallah (1919: 27) has attested to the general influence of the coast from the earliest period of contact: "This penetration to the coast was the reason that the Yaos began to regard the coast as their lode-star, and the arbiter of customs." And further, "Owing to this constant travelling to the coast, the Yaos soon began to imitate the customs of the coast ...." (Ibid.: 29). With the growth of the slave trade in the 18th century, Swahili traders began to enter the areas in which the Yao were settled and their influence became even more pronounced. In Humphrey Fisher's model of conversion, one of the factors which effects the transition from the stage of quarantine to that of mixing is what he describes as the 'cumulative impact' of Islamic witness (Fisher, 1984: 158ff). This is a consequence of the visibility and uniformity of the outward signs of adherence to Islam. In other words, the public manifestations of being a Muslim, like dress and prayer, reinforce one another by their uniformity over time and between various individual Muslims. But clearly this phenomenon is unlikely to be sufficient in itself to give rise to conversion. It may prepare the ground for conversion to Islam by leading to the adoption of customs and practices which are usually associated with an Islamic way of life, but without some additional major stimulus to precipitate a jump from gradual borrowings to full-scale conversion it is difficult

to see how this could be accomplished. This, I think, is the one major weakness in Fisher's model. The early stages of conversion - in his terms the transition between quarantine and mixing - happen just too easily and seamlessly. It is true that in the case of the Yao, as in many other instances elsewhere in Africa, Islam does not appear to demand much of its converts in the early days of their adherence and this indeed is an essential part of what I describe as the logic of Islamic transformation. Nevertheless, Fisher's resort to the 'cumulative impact' of Islam does not seem a sufficient explanation of why and how the step is taken - individually or collectively - from not being Muslim to claiming to be Muslim.

I am not suggesting that conversion is necessarily something that happens all of a sudden, as in Cardinal Newman's formulation of it as a convergence of probabilities followed by the leap of faith - the jump between polygon and circle. This view of conversion seems to be a peculiarly Roman Catholic one, probably taking St Augustine as its model - procrastination followed by sudden illumination. It assumes a background or milieu of the religion to which the convert has been exposed as well as a pressure of attraction from the religious community. In the case of the first Yao converts to Islam neither of these conditions can really be said to have existed simply on the basis of the influence of Arab and Swahili traders. A variation of the 'sudden illumination' model is of course that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, which may be taken



- as William James (1929: 217) pointed out - as the Protestant model of conversion. In this case there is not procrastination but rather indifference or active opposition to the faith in question followed by a sudden and dramatic illumination. There is a marked contrast between St Augustine's search culminating in the voice of a child saying 'Take up and read' and that of Paul, the persecutor of Christians, being hurled to the ground and blinded by the force of his illumination. Apart from being a rather more forceful form of conversion than that of Augustine, it is also a much more radical one in the sense that Paul was entirely and very swiftly transformed - within three days the scales had fallen from his eyes and he was ready to begin his apostolic mission. Protestant converts are likewise expected to make rapid and extensive changes to their lifestyle. This is the sort of conversion that Nock takes as definitive in his book on the subject: "By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right. It is seen at its fullest in the positive response of a man to the choice set before him by the prophetic religions." (1933: 7). This swift and radical 'turning' was a feature which - as the Protestant missionaries were to indignantly describe - was clearly lacking in the early Yao converts to Islam.

It is of course essential to distinguish between the conversion of individuals and that of groups. It may sometimes be plausible in the case of individuals to conceptualise conversion as a sudden event, but in groups it is more likely to take place as a process, something which happens by stages over time. This point is stressed by Levtzion, who contrasts the 'group conversions' of West Africa with individual conversions of the East African coast. In the West African case, "Islam was adopted by ethnic groups in their own milieu, while maintaining their own cultural identity. There was hardly a break with past traditions, and pre-Islamic customs and beliefs survived. In this process more people came under the influence of Islam, but they took longer to cover the distance from the former religion to Islam, viewed as a continuum from nominal acceptance of Islam to greater conformity and commitment." (Levtzion, 1979: 19). On the coast of East Africa, on the other hand, "Islamization implied Swahilization, as converts left their own tribes and joined the only known Muslim community, that of the Swahili. This was a process of individual conversions. Every convert had the personal experience of breaking off from his own society against social and moral pressures." (Ibid.: 19). An example of this East African pattern is that of the Giriama in southern Kenya. It would seem that for the small minority of Giriama converts, many of whom are entrepreneurs, the detachment implied by conversion is a significant advantage and motivation in the process (Parkin, 1972: 40ff). The Yao, despite their proximity and



links with the Swahili coast, appear to conform more to the West African scheme although Levtzion's formulation of group conversion suggests that the step to adopt Islam was less decisive than is the case with the Yao.

The whole question of causality also changes significantly when one shifts the analysis from an individual to a group. For instance, the statement *The child converted because a mission education would enable him to get a well-paid job* implies a very different level of causal explanation from that of *The tribe converted because it opened up new avenues of education and employment to them*. In the first statement one is dealing with a choice made by an individual and the psychological experience and concrete consequences of that decision. At the level of the individual conversion may sensibly be described in terms of cause and effect, while at the level of the group one is working with analogy and a much looser sense of causality. It is unlikely that a large social group will convert for reasons which are entirely uniform, and to say that a particular group has converted in fact means that a significant number of individuals who identify themselves as belonging to the group have converted. Yet there is a connection between these levels of analysis of individual and group conversion, and it is important to bear in mind that in the case of the Yao conversions to Islam, the first few converts at least made the step alone.

For details of the events which led up to the first Yao conversions it is necessary to return to Livingstone's account of Mataka's capital Mwembe, which he visited in 1866 on his way up the Rovuma valley. His meeting with the chief was described in the previous chapter, and his impressions of the place were summed up with some hyperbole in the phrase 'the Arabs are imitated in everything'. Livingstone doubtless overstates the case, but certainly the influence of the coast on Mataka and his people was very marked by this stage. One should not read too much into the square houses which along with clothing were Livingstone's main evidence for detecting Arab influence since Mataka's town was of quite recent construction and this architectural change may have been a new innovation. However, the depth of links with the coast and the extent of the slave trade and Yao involvement in it were clear enough:

Mataka has been an active hand in slave wars himself, though he now wishes to settle down in quiet. The Waiyau generally are still the most active agents the slave-traders have. The caravan leaders from Kilwa arrive at a Waiyau village, show the goods they have brought, are treated liberally by the elders, and told to wait and enjoy themselves, slaves enough to purchase all will be procured: then a foray is made against the Mang'anja who have few or no guns. The Waiyau who come against them are abundantly supplied with both by their coast guests. Several of the low coast Arabs, who differ in nothing from the Waiyau, usually accompany the foray, and do business on their own account: this is the usual way in which a safari is furnished with slaves. (Waller [1], 1874: 78)



It is unlikely that the 'low coast Arabs' who Livingstone saw in the interior would have been much interested in making converts. That is, until the slave trade was threatened. Then there was a motive both from their point of view and from that of the Yao chiefs - who had much to lose from being cut off from the coast - for finding something over and above trade to consolidate the links with the coast. And it is notable that the chiefs who were first threatened by the British, like Makanjila, Mponda and Jalasi, were among the first to declare for Islam. The Yao chiefs were by no means the implacable foes of the British, but a comment of Kirk's on the activities of the UMCA on the Shire highlands may have been prescient. He writes of an attack on the Yao in 1861 thus:

[Bishop Mackenzie] determined on attacking a camp of Ajawa, a little beyond Chinsunzes on the slope leading to Zomba. The policy of this attack seems questionable. In the affair of Dr Livingstone the Ajawa made the attack but here the English began or at least by going with a large body of Mang'anja up to the camp, made the equivalent to an attack. Thus the English will be put down as the natural enemies of the Ajawa whereas the Mang'anja are as bad slave traders as the Ajawa and much greater cowards also. (Foskett [II], 1965 : 399)

The growing tension between the British missionaries and the Yao chiefs was something which the slavers played upon, and religion became increasingly prominent as one of the factors in the struggle. A clue as to how this occurred may be gained by an observation which Livingstone made while

with the Yao chief 'Mukate'<sup>1</sup> who he visited after leaving Mataka and going on up to the Lake: "The Arabs have told the chief [Mukate] that our object in capturing slavers is to get them into our own possession, and make them of our own religion." (Waller [1], 1874: 104). This suggests that the slavers, feeling the threat of 'commerce and Christianity', have a last card to play: Islam and slavery against the missionaries - the religious card. The whole question of religious affiliation was rapidly becoming politicised.

A few years later the influence of the coast had become even more pronounced, as Young found when he revisited Mponda in 1875 after a hiatus of some eight years: "In many respects Mponda's ways were altered. It was evident that the Arabs and Arab fashions were in vogue. A square-built house, daubed and ornamented as one sees them in Johanna, Kilwa, and other towns, took the place of the usual bee-hive hut." (Young, 1877: 61). And Young discovered an even more momentous change in the situation of the Yao chiefs. This was the arrival on the lake shore of the chief Makanjila: "We ascertained that a powerful chief, Makanjila, had moved towards the lake three years previously [from October 1875], shifting his quarters from near Mataka's town - I suppose on the principle that 'two of a trade cannot agree'." (Ibid.: 73). Arriving at Makanjila's, Young was met by the chief's son, and found he

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<sup>1</sup>Nkata - later to become the chiefdom of Jalasi.



had been to Zanzibar (Ibid.: 94). The chief Makanjila himself made quite an impression on Young:

Compared with the other chiefs we had visited, we had here a man of a very different stamp to either Ajawa or Mang'anja. He must have a considerable mixture of Arab blood, I imagine, and affects Arab ways. He can read and write, moreover; and from constant intercourse with the coast has a very clear notion as to the policy of keeping in with the English. (Young, 1877: 139)

A couple of years later Elton visited Makanjila, now well-established in his new home: "The town is an extensive settlement, and the houses built with more care than I should have expected to see. The chief boasts of a deep verandah and a 'baraza', better than many of the Zanzibar tumble-down mansions." (Elton, 1879: 288). He was also impressed by the person of the chief Makanjila, who was dressed in elegant coastal clothes and spoke Swahili fluently (Ibid.: 288). As Elton left the town, he came upon a sight which marks an epoch in the history of the Yao: "There is a 'mwalimu' (teacher) established here, who teaches reading and the Koran. We passed the school-house, and saw the row of slates in the verandah." (Ibid.: 289). That the chief himself had already converted to Islam was confirmed by the UMCA missionary W.P. Johnson when he visited Makanjila on the lake in 1880:

The Mwembe people never settled on the edge of the Lake and Makanjila (the Chopper), first of three of the name and surnamed 'of the hand', who had been at the coast and had been initiated as a Mohammedan, was the first to make a raiding

centre on the Lake itself. He was living at Chizunguli, on a hill near the Lake, when I first saw him in 1880, and he occupied the long promontory, called after him Makanjila's Point and now Fort Maguire, in 1882. (Johnson, 1922: 114-115)

It is difficult to put an exact date on the conversion to Islam of this Makanjila, who was in fact not the first but the third of the name, for it was Makanjila III Bwanali wa Nkachelenga who Johnson met. The date of 1870 which several scholars have adopted seems plausible though it could have been considerably earlier.<sup>1</sup> Johnson's visit to Makanjila in 1880 revealed signs of a well-established Muslim presence: "I reached Makanjila's by way of the hill Mtonia from Mataka's town at Mwembe; a little lime had been found near his then village, with which he had decorated a mosque, and an open verandah was used for a school. In front of the verandah two coco-nut trees were growing, the only ones of any size I have seen at Nyassa." (Johnson, 1884: 513). There are several indications here that Islam had already taken root in Makanjila's town, and that it was beginning to enlist others besides the chief: "There I first made the acquaintance of his Mahomedan teacher, who has gathered round him all the upper class in the place; he is a fine, tall man, with probably some Arab blood, and quotes and reads the Koran fluently." (Ibid.: 513). Recalling a visit to Makanjila's which took place some few years later in 1888, Johnson makes some noteworthy observations which, while they may be coloured by the wisdom of hindsight,

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<sup>1</sup>Kubik (1984: 24) suggests that this may have taken place much earlier than 1870, but the evidence for this is not very substantial.



nevertheless shed a very interesting light on the dynamics of this earliest stage of conversion:

I was struck by two or three things that happened on one of our visits there in the old Makanjila's time. In the first place, he sent off his dhow to meet us, and as she came near the steamer and the crew heard that we were at prayers, they only rowed very gently and silently so as not to disturb us. Then again, after we had a consultation with the Chief and some preaching of our message, I noticed that the people said in conversation: 'The Chief is very favourable and we shall become A-Nasara'\* (the Yao name for Christians) 'as we have become Wa-Islam' (Mohammedans). But Makanjila 'of the hand' died and the second Makanjila 'of the ears', was a very worthless character, who was said to have actually invited some of his own Mohammedan retainers to a feast and to have given them human flesh to eat. In his time our difficulties were greater. Once, for instance, he insisted on taking my Quran away from my boy, though he tried to pass it off as a joke rather than a robbery.

\*[WPJ footnote: This name is now commonly used on the Lake for Mohammedans, whereas it ought to mean Christians, and did among the old Yaos. Nasara is Nazareth.] (Johnson, 1924: 152-153)

There is a sense that Johnson, in retrospect, believes that an opportunity was lost, and that if the Christian missionaries had worked harder while things still seemed to be in the balance - in the time of the Makanjila 'of the hand' - they may have tipped the scales against Islam. And indeed it does almost seem that things could have gone either way at that stage, despite the influence of the coast and the extent to which chiefs valued their links with the slave traders. There is no impression of an inexorable movement towards Islam - the juggernaut, if it can be described as such, had not yet started to roll. But

events conspired against the missionaries - in their determination to put an end to the slave trade they managed to alienate many of the powerful chiefs and then to lose most of their followers as well. Part of the problem for the missionaries was that they misjudged the politics of the situation. The position of the chiefs was fairly insecure, and depended to a large extent upon being able to satisfy the ambitions of their followers which had been shaped by the hazards and rewards of the slave trade. Above all, they needed a renewed source of legitimation of their status to confront the rapidly changing regional political economy. It is also possible that some of them believed that the British would be defeated in the conflict with the Arabs and Swahili, and that this was the time to make their allegiance clear, and to signal this by adopting the religion of their trading partners.

At around the same time as the conversion of Makanjila III Bwanali several of the other important Yao chiefs on the slave route also declared for Islam. We can assume that Mataka II Nyenje had converted by the time of his death in the 1880s, since he was buried next to a mosque and is remembered as Mataka of the Mosque: "That was Che Mataka the Second ... He was buried there on Namisuwi hill in the verandah of the Mosque, and that is why the Mwembe people say in making an oath, 'By the Mataka of the Mosque'...." (Abdallah, 1919: 56). It is not certain when Mponda converted, but the transformation of his town in the early 1870s which Young (1877: 61) described, and the evidence of



a sudden upsurge in coastal influence, suggest that he had probably made an overt commitment to Islam by this time. The way in which Nkata's chieftaincy was enlisted to Islam has been reconstructed by Cole-King (1982) and it throws more light on the avenues through which conversion was accomplished. The first Chief Nkata, who Livingstone had visited at his town adjacent to Mangochi mountain in 1866, had a sister named Kabutu. Upon Nkata's death, he was succeeded by a son of Kabutu, and upon the second Nkata's death soon afterward another son of Kabutu became the third Nkata. This Nkata was soon killed in a battle with one of his sub-chiefs, and yet another son of Kabutu was now in line of succession. However this son was considered to be too young to become chief, and so Kabutu was appointed regent until the boy succeeded in about 1888. It seems that this boy had been educated by Muslims and had adopted an Islamic name (Zarafi, or Jalasi as it becomes in Chiyao) which subsequently became the name of the chiefdom (Ibid.: 7).

What is most interesting about Jalasi's recruitment to Islam is that it reveals a path which may well have been followed by other Yao chiefs. The *waalimu* (teachers) or scribes which several of the chiefs employed at this time - from the middle of the nineteenth century - and who frequently acted as advisors and as mediators between chiefs and the coast, may not have been able to convert the chiefs themselves, but could have persuaded them to have their children or (since these would not usually have been

the same) their heirs taught by Muslims. It also seems that some of the younger generation spent more time at the coast than would have been possible for chiefs or headman.

Abdallah describes how, after the death of the first Mataka, his heir had to be recalled from the coast: "Now at the time of Che Mataka's death, his nephew Che Nyenje was at Chiwinja on the coast, and Kumtelela (the son of Bibi Kwikanga) sent messengers to fetch him." (1919: 55). This was of course Mataka II Nyenje, the first of the Mataka's to be recognised as a Muslim. The first Makanjila to convert had also done so after a visit to the coast which included a stay at Zanzibar. Several of my informants stressed the significance of Makanjila III Bwanali's visit to Zanzibar, claiming that it was there that he had been initiated into Islam, and that he had returned with Swahili and Nyamwezi *waalimu* to help him propagate the new religion.

This then was the first wave - or rather, the first trickle - of Yao converts to Islam. They were the younger generation of the chiefly dynasties that had gained their power in the slave trade. They emerge from descriptions as being arrogant yet insecure, displaying the characteristics of what they had indeed become - the *nouveau riche* of the region in the late nineteenth century. They were powerful, but their power was continually being threatened both by external forces and internal rivalry. The factors that had prepared the ground for conversion - the convergence of probabilities, in Newman's terms - are clear enough. The



long history of exposure to Islam, an economy increasingly based on collaboration with Muslim traders, the adoption of coastal styles and practices, a recognition of the usefulness of skills such as writing that were associated with Islam, and a growing awareness of the power and extent of the Muslim world were all contributing factors. Yet there must have been added to these conditions a precipitating element which would account for the sudden spate of apparently disconnected conversions happening at much the same time. As I have suggested, this was the intensification of the struggle with the British over the slave trade and the perception that religious affiliation was a significant issue in this conflict - commerce and Christianity versus Islam and the slave trade.

These first conversions therefore would seem to have been motivated to a large extent by political considerations. Makanjila, Mataka, Mponda, Jalasi and the other lesser chiefs who joined this initial wave of conversions to Islam were those who had most to lose by the ending of the slave trade. Their actual paths to conversion were slightly different in each case, but the circumstances surrounding the conversions were such that we can with some confidence ascribe a uniform political motive to them. A conversation between W.P.Johnson and Makanjila IV at the time of the so-called 'Arab War' in the late 1880s reveals the underlying politics of the conversions quite clearly:

Later on came the troubles at the north end of the Lake, spreading to Makanjila's side [i.e. the southern half of

eastern side of the Lake], the spirit of which was bombastically expressed by Makanjila in a talk with me: 'If the Wazungu (white men) try and take the Sultan of Zanzibar's country, I, Makanjila, will come to his rescue!' 'Coast men and Arab versus white man and German' not perhaps unnaturally led to a party cry, 'Circumcised versus Uncircumcised,' as circumcision was practised by all the Yao as well as by the coast people. It was during these troubles that a distinct movement began south at Makanjila's to graft the Mohammedan initiation dance 'Jandu' on to the Yao initiation dance 'Dagola.' It seemed to take like wild-fire.<sup>1</sup>

Before proceeding to describe the spread of Islam from the chiefs to their followers, to which Johnson's account alludes, it is necessary for me to pause and clarify what I mean by the *motive* for conversion here. I am not suggesting that these converts had not been persuaded of the truth of Islam, or that belief and conviction had no part to play in these early conversions. Nor am I saying that a religious choice is reducible to a political one. From the point of view of the Yao chiefs at that time, though, a religious choice had to be a political one. In other words, however much questions of faith and the truth of a religious system might have troubled them, conversion at that time was an act which they knew to have important political implications. From an analytical viewpoint it was in practice, in the outward manifestations of declaring for Islam, that conversion had its most significant motives and effects. The question of belief, of whether or not these converts thought seriously about the doctrines and

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<sup>1</sup>W.P.Johnson, *Central Africa*, April 1900: 54. For a description of the events which became known as the 'Arab War' see Macmillan (1972).



tenets of Islam, is simply not pertinent here. It is one of the features of Islam that was often remarked upon by the Christian missionaries that it did not make cumbersome demands upon its converts. There was no catechism or urgency of indoctrination, and initially it was far more in the elaboration and addition of practices than in the renunciation of either beliefs or practices that the new religion made its presence felt.

The priority of practice becomes even more evident in the manner in which Islam was disseminated from the chiefs to their followers. Johnson mentions the centrality of the initiation rituals and circumcision in this process, and these were indeed the locus and the mechanism for mass conversion. The descriptions of the spread of Islam at this time all emphasise this ritual aspect of conversion, and this was not simply because the missionaries were not inclined to regard the local Muslims as serious competitors on a theological terrain.<sup>1</sup> To the contrary, they were continually frustrated by the lack of a coherent religious dogma against which they could pit their proselytising efforts. They saw the Islamic emphasis on ritual as an unfair tactic - a means of avoiding a comparison of the merits of the two religions as systems of revealed truth. It was further confirmation, in their view, that what they were dealing with was a political movement disguised as religious conversion. Their perception of the Islamic

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<sup>1</sup>The most detailed description and analysis of Yao conversion at this time is contained in a series of articles by Johnson and although his views are obviously not disinterested he was in general a well-informed and reliable commentator.

practice which was being adopted was that it was a mere simulacrum. As far as they were concerned the Yao conversions to Islam were the expression of a political sentiment in the form of a religious declaration. It was all the more insidious in that they saw it as a ploy on the part of the chiefs and slavers to throw up an obstacle to the influence of the missionaries and to consolidate opposition to the growing British presence in the region, rather than to inculcate any sort of genuine religious beliefs in their followers.

The spur for this second wave of conversions was the culmination of the struggle with the British over the slave trade. After the ill-fated UMCA mission at Magomero had been forced to leave the region there was a short hiatus before the more successful efforts of the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland missions to establish themselves at Cape Maclear and Blantyre respectively in the 1870s. In the same decade the African Lakes Company began to set up trading stations in the region, planters started arriving on the Shire highlands, and the numbers of British there began to grow. In 1891 a British Protectorate was declared over the territory then known as Nyasaland, and which is now Malawi (Baker, 1972: 324-328). Harry Johnston, the first Commissioner of the Protectorate, was quick to initiate a series of campaigns against the Yao chiefs with the aim of putting an end to the slave trade. His forces met with resolute opposition and suffered casualties and defeats at the hands of



Makanjila and Jalasi. It was not until the end of 1895 that Jalasi was finally defeated and the slave trade from the Protectorate was terminated (Cole-King, 1982: 8-12). The defeat of the Yao chiefs and the end of their part in the slave trade had two slightly paradoxical consequences. On the one hand there was a swift accommodation to the new *status quo* and an eagerness on the part of many of the Yao to serve in the armed forces of their former adversary.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, though, it was just at this time that conversion to Islam became really widespread among the Yao. Johnson (1924: 202) wrote of this as follows:

It was very noticeable how in these years there was a recrudescence of the craze for Mohammedanism. It seemed as if the slavers, checked by the government, were determined to extend their moral force. As always, they used the native attachment to the old Yao initiation dances, encouraging these dances, and even the Nyasa dances, in order to introduce gradually another dance which was regarded as an initiation into Mohammedanism, though there is no foundation in the Quran or in tradition for any such custom; its name was *jandu*. They used the native funeral ceremonies in the same way.

Several other missionaries also linked the ending of the slave trade to the increasingly rapid spread of Islam. However it is clear that the politics of conversion must have altered somewhat after the defeat of the chiefs. It was no longer a question of an alliance against the British or a commitment to an alternative political economy. The swift and pragmatic embrace of the opportunities which the

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<sup>1</sup>This observation was made by several missionaries and officials and is noted as early as the beginning of 1896 in the *British Central Africa Gazette*, 3(2), 15 January 1896, 1.

British Protectorate offered to the defeated Yao contradicts the notion of a simple extension of the motives of the initial conversions. The dynamics of the process had become more complex as well as more compelling. Johnson's assertion that this upsurge in the movement towards Islam was a kind of sublimation of resistance against the British is made more explicit elsewhere: "Just at the time when the English broke the native chief's power, this social conquest the other way went on by leaps and bounds."<sup>1</sup> His frustration at this turn of events is evident, but he is not able to offer a convincing explanation of why Islam should have become more attractive to the defeated Yao nor of why the slavers would have been interested in making converts at a time when slaving was effectively ended.

It is clear that a link had been established between the Yao initiation rituals and conversion to Islam, as another of the members of the UMCA observed: "Then, too, they have adopted certain heathen customs, and wrapped them up in a Mohammedan garb. Thus, they have taken certain initiation dances, specially the *Jandu*, for boys, and have tried to make that into an initiation into Mohammedanism."<sup>2</sup> In fact, the use of the term *jandu* (or *jando*) suggests that the ritual had already been Islamised. The Swahili term *jando* implies a complete circumcision of boys as prescribed by Islam, as opposed to the partial circumcision of the pre-Islamic *lupanda* (Stannus & Davey, 1913: 120; cf. Sanderson,

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<sup>1</sup>*Central Africa*, April 1900, 54.

<sup>2</sup>H.A.Machell Cox: 'A Debasing Influence' *Central Africa*, April 1909, 98.



1954: 275), but apart from the incorporation of this Islamised form of circumcision the Yao initiation ceremony remained largely unaltered. *Jando* thus became at once an entrance to Islam and a Yao initiation ritual. This innovation could only have taken place at the instigation of the chiefs. The initiation ceremony for boys was firmly under the control of the chiefs and this made it possible for it to become one of the main channels through which Islam was disseminated downwards from the chiefs to their followers. Mitchell points out that Macdonald's description - from about 1880 - indicates that the right to hold initiation ceremonies was held by the chief only, and that this is supported by a report from the turn of the century that states clearly that while the girls' initiations could take place under the auspices of a village headman, the boys' initiation could only be ordered by a senior chief (1956: 80-81). Although Mitchell found that when he was there the situation had changed to the extent that village headmen could hold initiation ceremonies, the influence of the chief was still significant: "The sanction the chief holds over the headmen in this respect is mystical. A village headman believes that the initiation will be a success (that is, that the initiands will be free from the harm of wild beasts and illness, or the circumcision wounds of the boys will heal quickly and well), only if the approval of the chief's ancestors is obtained. He cannot hold the initiation ceremonies, unless he has obtained the basket [in which the oblatinal flour for the ceremonies is carried] from the chief." (Ibid.: 81). What is certain is

that at the time that *jando* was being substituted for *lupanda*, the initiations were very much the concern of the chiefs and in the places where this change was occurring it must have been with the sanction of the chiefs.

The use of initiation rituals as the main conduit for the downward spread of Islam served the purposes of the chiefs admirably. I have suggested that their authority was tenuous, depending mainly on their actual capability in slave trading and their military expertise. Once they had been defeated and the slave trade had been ended there was an urgent need for the chiefs to find another source of legitimation. Thus they turned once again to Islam. Several of them had already converted and they needed to take their followers with them or risk a further erosion of their authority. By linking the initiation rituals - and therefore Yao identity - to Islam the chiefs were reinforcing their own position as custodians of Yao tribal identity. The Islamisation of rituals emphasised the difference between the Yao and others in the region and at the same time confirmed the authority of the Muslim chiefs. What made this a most ingenious solution to the problems of the chiefs is that it involved no tiresome transformations of ritual or belief, merely an augmentation of practice. As the Christian missionaries were quick to point out, conversion to Islam did not for most of the Yao involve any great transformation or 'turning': "The follower of the Crescent has adapted his religion much more to the surroundings of the African than has the European, and has



interwoven some of the immoral dances of the black man into the initiation ceremonies of his belief .... The Mohammedan teacher has many advantages over the Christian. In the first instance, the son of Islam is not asked to renounce much in the way of evil. He finds that the UMCA teacher, on the other hand, is very clear in his denunciation of sin." (De La Pryme, 1903: 67). The Islamic practice that was adopted by the Yao converts made few unpleasant demands upon them and can really be best described as an elaboration of certain pre-Islamic Yao practices. Yet it was a decisive step, because from that time onward Yao identity became linked to a nominal commitment to Islam and this was to have far-reaching consequences. Despite the lack of a major upheaval of belief and practice in the new Yao Muslims, the concatenation of tribal identity with Islam was bound to entrench the latter.

It is not my intention to suggest that conversion was a sort of sleight-of-hand played by the chiefs on their followers but I am persuaded by a careful consideration of the evidence that the main conversions to Islam were underpinned by fairly straightforward political strategies. It is important to note however that this is not the way that it is seen in retrospect by most Yao Muslims. The popular account of conversion to Islam is that it was brought to the region by particular individuals who became responsible for enlightening the Yao and revealing to them the truth of Islam. Many of the accounts of the coming of Islam that I recorded emphasise the pivotal role of one or

two individuals and also the way that the religion was transmitted from one Muslim teacher to another. For instance a senior sheikh at Makanjila's told me the following story of the origins of Islam in the chiefdom:

Makanjila [III] Bwanali wa Nkachelenga went to Zanzibar and returned with some Nyamwezi and Swahilis and they started a *madrasa* on the lakeshore. Che Makanjila took some of his young men to the *madrasa* - including Abdallah Mkwanda and Amansi Kapinjili. Abdallah Mkwanda went to Malindi to teach about Islam while Amansi Kapinjili taught here in Makanjila's and others went to Mataka's. Sheikh Sabiti Ngaunje came from Mozambique to learn under Abdallah Mkwanda. Sabiti then went to make his *madrasa* near Namwera.... The people who brought Shazria [the Shadhiliya Sufi order - see Chapter 8] to Makanjila's were Arabs who came after the death of Makanjila Bwanali. Amansi Kapinjili was the one who was the most important of the sheikhs in the teaching of Shazria.

There are certain names that appear in almost every account of the spread of Islam and there are two in particular - Abdallah Mkwanda and Sabiti Ngaunje<sup>1</sup> - that come up without fail. The order of priority of these two sheikhs varies from place to place according to whether and for how long they stayed there and whether the senior sheikhs in that chiefdom studied under the one or the other. Thus the collection of *Amachinga Yao Traditions* (Phiri, Vaughan & Makuluni, 1977) based on interviews done mainly on the Shire highlands repeatedly mentions Sabiti, but around the lakeshore it is more likely that Abdallah Mkwanda will be given the credit for introducing Islam to the region. The

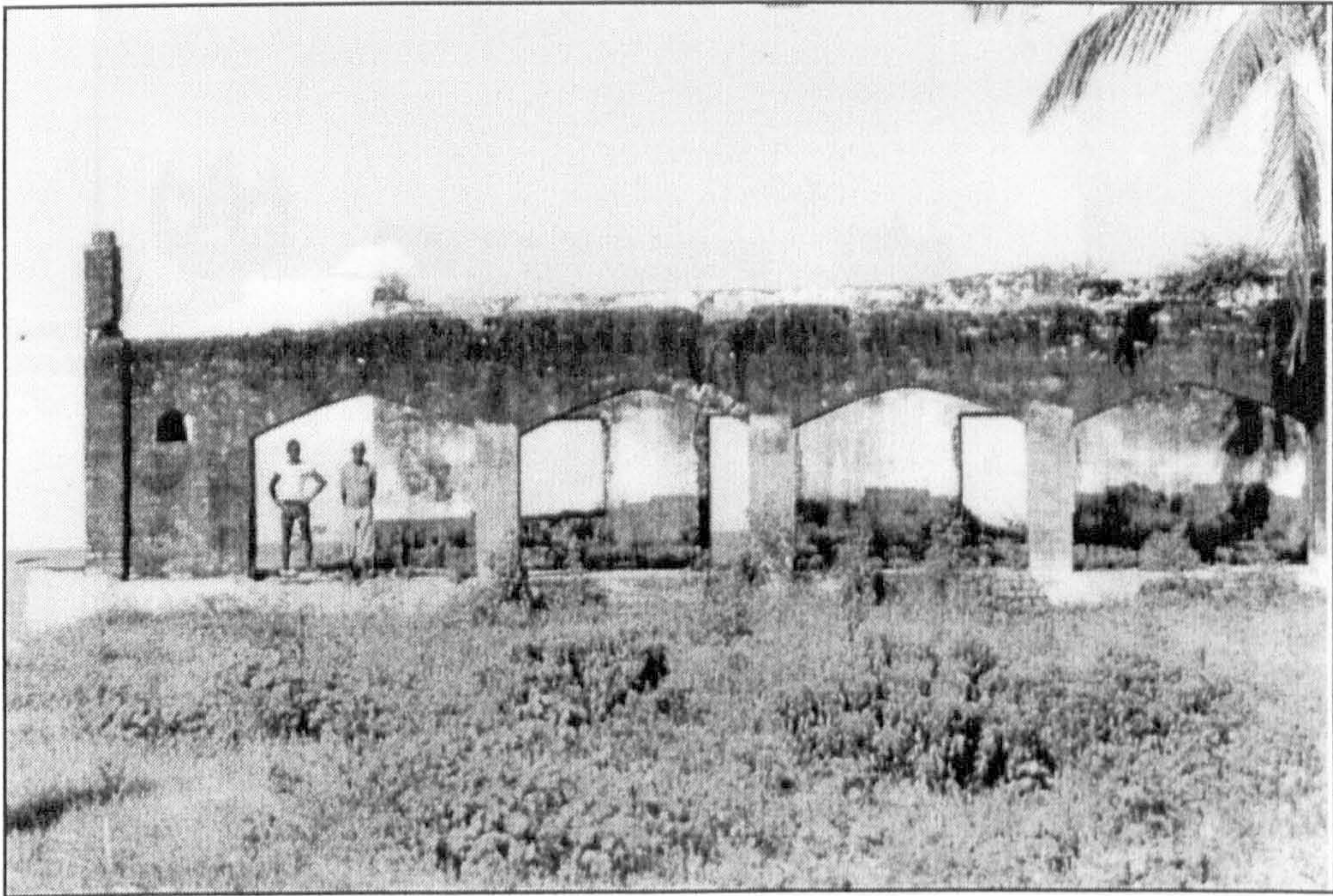
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<sup>1</sup>Sabiti is the Yao form of the Arabic name Thabit.



local Muslims are not alone in their perception of the role of individual teachers in the spread of Islam. Greenstein's analysis of the expansion of Islam depends on the notion that, as he puts it, "the major cause was the charisma and initiative of the responsible individuals." (1976/77: 1). Were one to rely, as Greenstein does, mainly on interviews with sheikhs and *waalimu* then almost inevitably the history of Islam in the region will become a sort of hagiography. There is no doubt that in the training of religious specialists there were a few dominant and very influential figures, but I think it would be naive to believe that descriptions by their followers of the role of revered teachers in the general spread of Islam are likely to be accurate and sufficient. In the following chapter on the introduction of Sufism to the Yao Muslims I deal with the growing influence of the sheikhs, but I remain convinced that the balance of evidence strongly supports the view that it was the strategies of the chiefs rather than the proselytising efforts of the sheikhs that was responsible for the major Yao conversions to Islam.





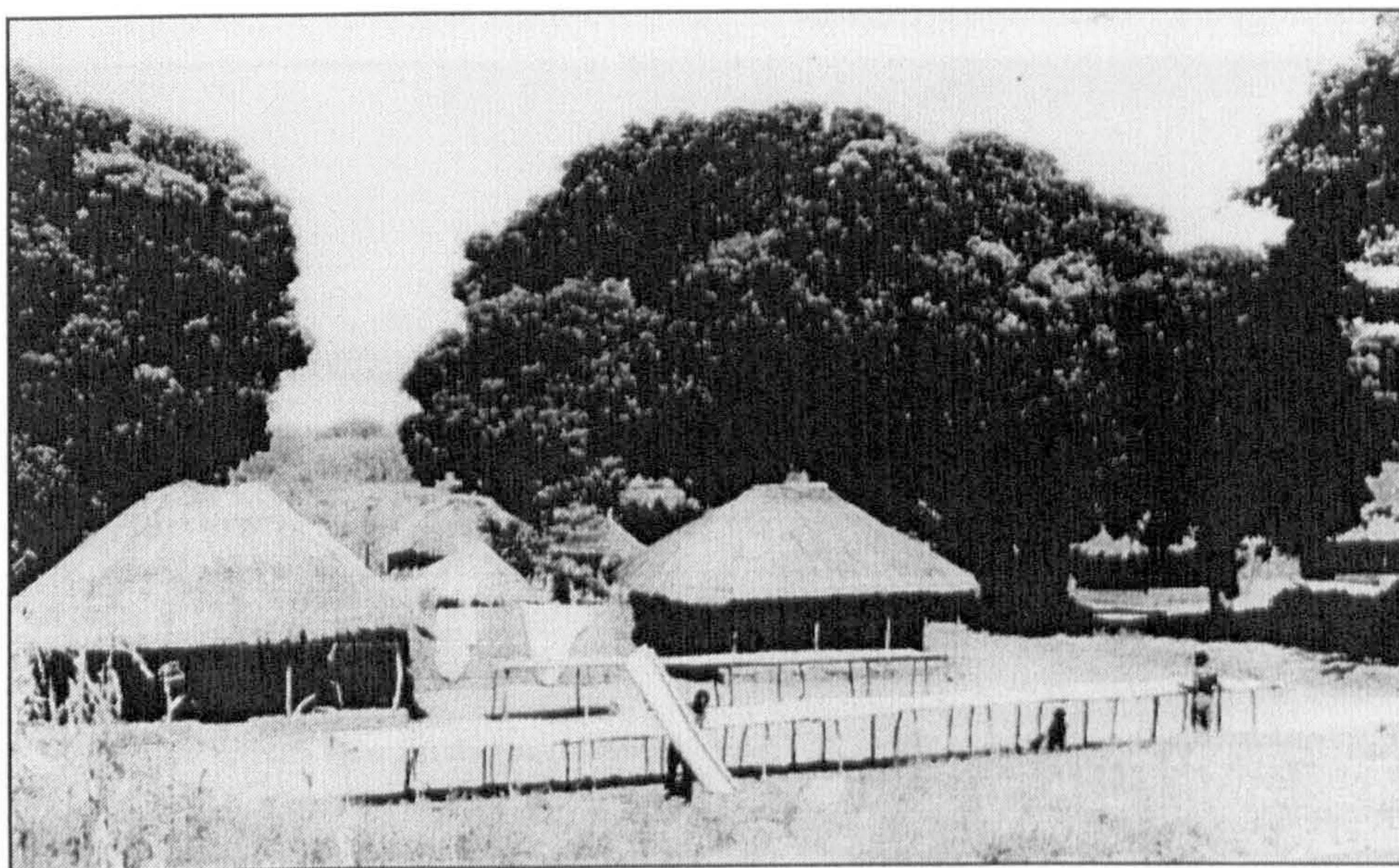
Ruins of Malawi's oldest mosque at Nkhotakota





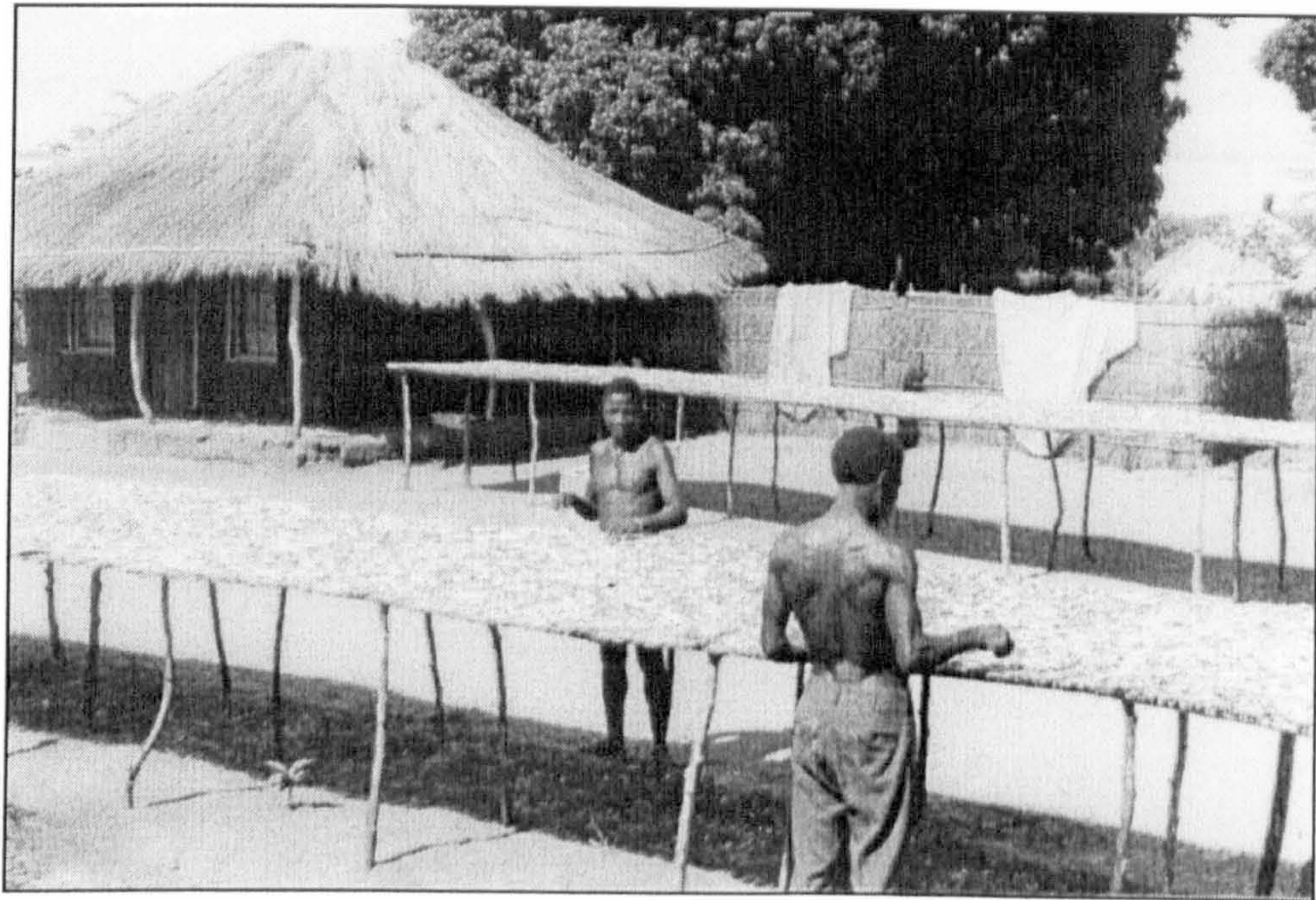
Sheikh at mosque entrance





Houses at Makwinja village





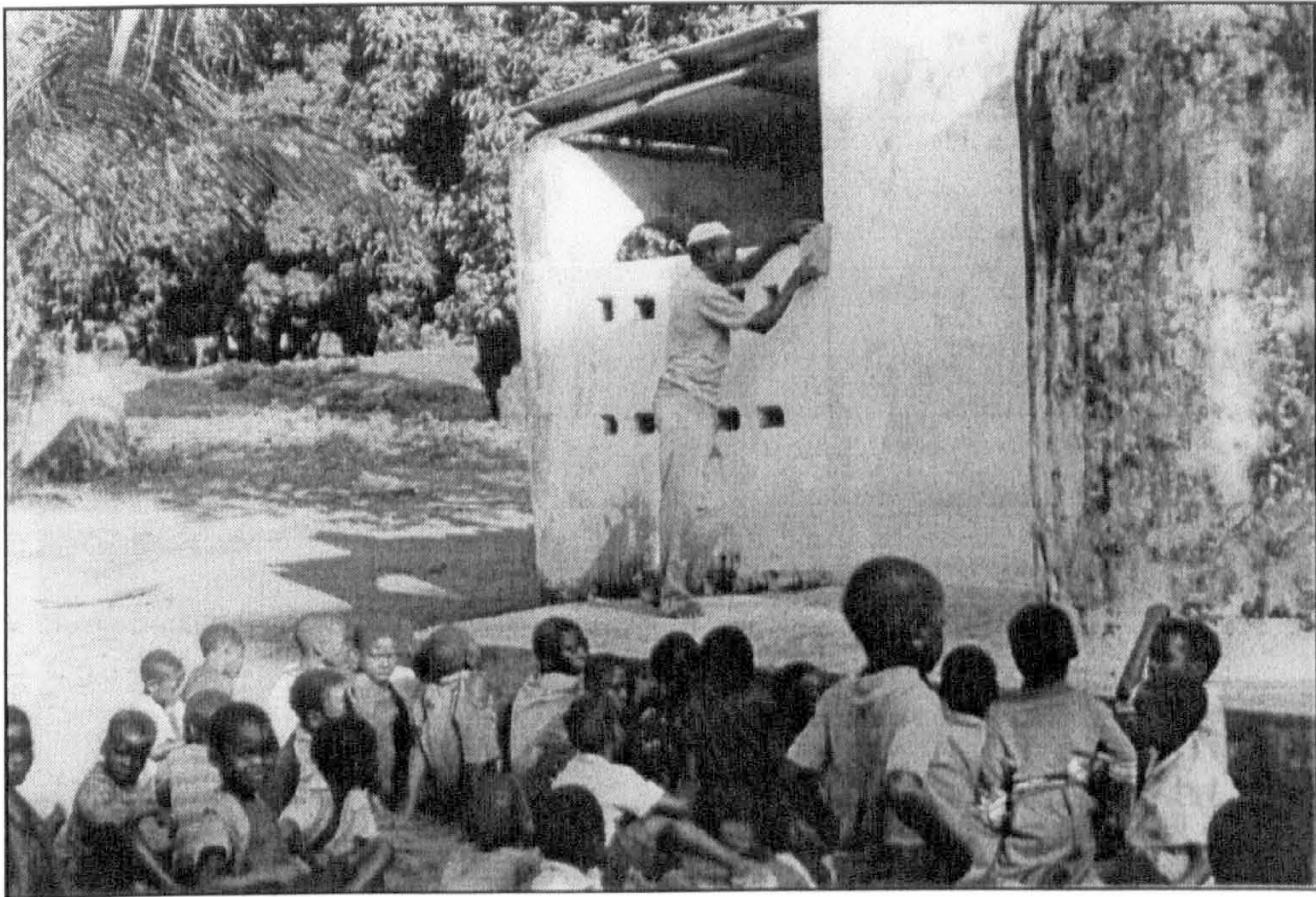
Spreading *usipa* fish out on racks to dry





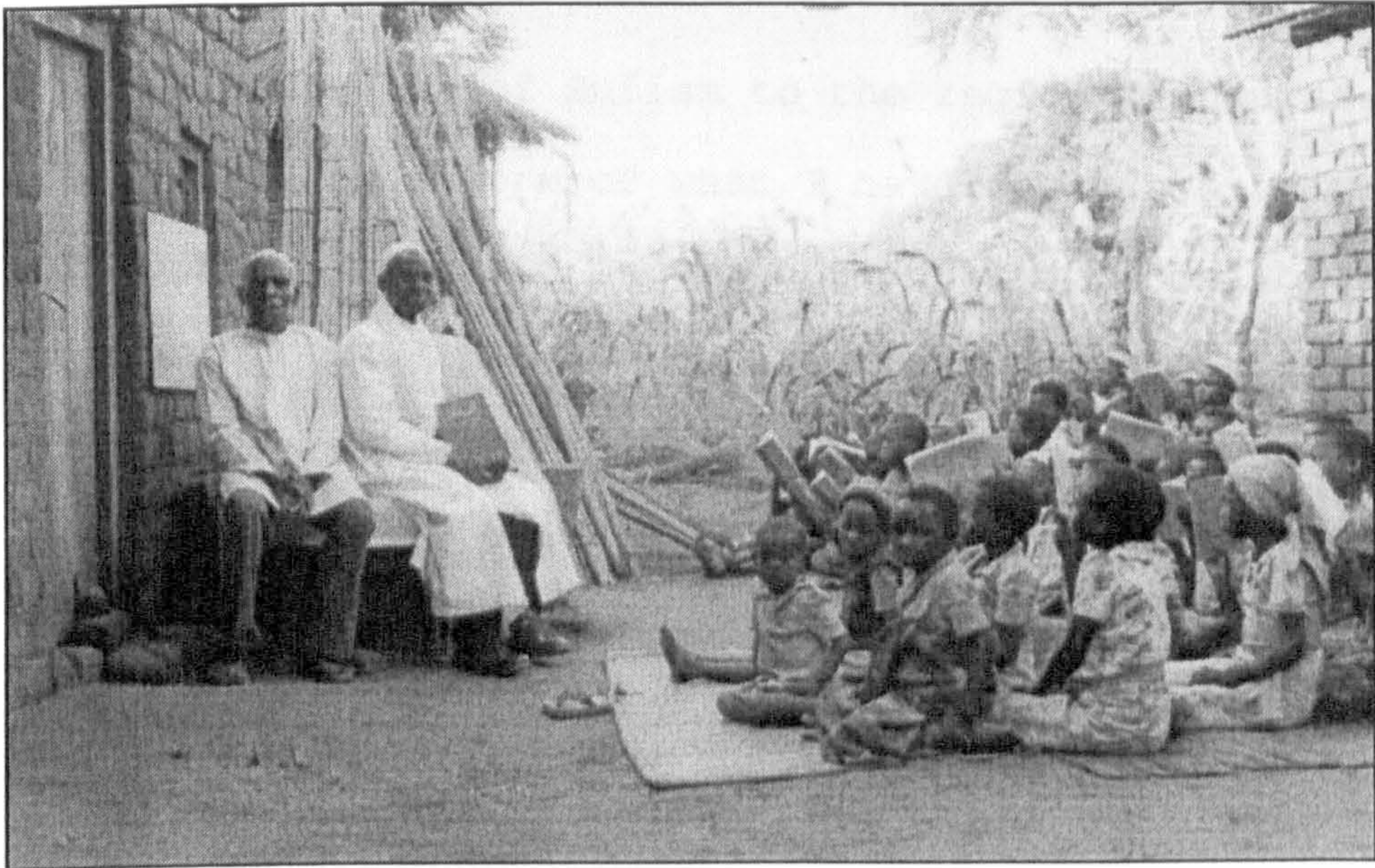
Children at mosque in Makwinja village





*Madrassa at Makwinja village*





*Sukuti* leaders teaching at Mpilipili



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## THE YAO *TARIQA*

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The introduction of Sufism to the region inaugurates the fully developed form of what I have described as the phase of appropriation and accommodation in my model of Islamic change. It was through the practices and organisational structures associated with Sufism that Islam gradually consolidated its hold on the Yao converts and gradually transformed itself from being primarily a political movement into a more broadly religious one. At the same time, though, Sufism enabled the Yao to reinforce the identity that they had been constructing in the previous few decades. The rituals and practices of Sufism were attractive and easy to appropriate, and many of them simply augmented pre-Islamic practices. There was no question of a conflict or dissonance between the old and the new rituals - it was simply a matter of choice and elaboration. It would be misleading even to characterise this phase as syncretistic, implying that one is dealing with two different systems, when in fact what was happening was merely the transformation and addition of a few practices.

The religious leaders who were responsible for propagating Sufi practices were mostly sheikhs who had links, sometimes economic and often also of kinship, with the chiefs. The alliance between political and religious authority became well established, with chiefs and sheikhs forming mutually beneficial relationships. It may however be useful to briefly outline the origins and nature of Sufism before describing its influence on the Yao Muslims.

Sufi orders, known also as *tariqas* (an Arabic word meaning way or path), originated as a mystical movement within Sunni or mainstream Islam. The first important *tariqa*, which emerged in Persia in the twelfth century, was named the Qadiriya after its founder, Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani. Several other major orders were created soon afterwards, including the Shadhiliya, inspired by a scholar of the Maghrib named al-Hasan al-Shadhili, which became very popular in North Africa. There are now a great many Sufi orders, some of which are schismatic offshoots of the early orders, but it is the Qadiriya and the Shadhiliya that have impinged on the Yao Muslims. Arberry points out that each order is "marked by its particular ritual, far more than by any discrimination of doctrine." (1979: 89). The central ritual, common to most of the Sufi orders, is known as *dhikr* (Arabic: the 'remembrance' of God by the repetition of His name and attributes). The performance of *dhikr* is a crucial element in the spread and consolidation of a *tariqa*. A typical performance of *dhikr* is described as follows: "In a *dhikr* circle (here *dhikr* means the frequent



'mention' of God), the participants commonly sang hymns, recited formulas, and brought themselves to the brink of collective ecstasy by techniques of controlled breathing or bodily motion. Hyperventilation, or states of consciousness approaching the threshold of hyperventilation, could be induced by these collective rites." (Martin, 1976: 1-2).

The significance of *dhikr* to the early Sufis can be illustrated by the following passage from the autobiography of the great Muslim scholar and mystic, al-Ghazali:

Then I turned my attention to the Way of the Sufis. I knew that it could not be traversed to the end without both doctrine and practice, and that the gist of the doctrine lies in overcoming the appetites of the flesh and getting rid of its evil dispositions and vile qualities, so that the heart may be cleared of all but God; and the means of clearing it is *dhikr* Allah, i.e. commemoration of God and concentration of every thought upon Him. Now, the doctrine was easier to me than the practice, so I began by learning their doctrine from the books and sayings of their Shaykhs, until I acquired as much of their Way as it is possible to acquire by learning and hearing, and saw plainly that what is most peculiar to them cannot be learned, but can only be reached by immediate experience and ecstasy and inward transformation. (In Arberry, 1979: 80).

What I wish to emphasise in al-Ghazali's account of his discovery of the Sufi way is that its essential character involves practice and ritual rather than doctrine. It can be argued that the practice of *dhikr* by the Yao Muslims has very little of the significance that it had for the early Sufis, associated as it then was with asceticism and a highly disciplined mysticism, but it is worth bearing in

mind this point that Sufism is above all about experiential states - what are sometimes referred to as 'altered states of consciousness'.

Central to the organisation of the *tariqa* is the relationship between teacher (sheikh) and disciple (*murid*). Sheikhs often established a centre or *ribat* (Arabic: convent) where their followers resided and studied (Arberry, 1979: 84). However, there is no tradition of celibacy or seclusion in the *tariqa*, and becoming a *murid* by no means precluded the pursuit of a more worldly occupation. Indeed, as Donal Cruise O'Brien (1970) has demonstrated, in certain circumstances the *tariqa* can provide the organisational basis for a major transformation of the political economy. In general, though, the *tariqa* is a loosely structured organisation, and as Martin (1976: 2) has noted, they did not usually become politicised without strong forces external to the *tariqa* being brought to bear on it.

It is this flexible organisational function which partly accounts for the popularity of Sufism among tribal Muslims. In theory Islam makes no provision for a formal priesthood or church, but in practice the sheikh and *tariqa* fill this role for those parts of the Muslim world which seem to require it. Referring to the origins of the Sufi movement, Gellner suggests that "the most important factor, at least sociologically, seems to be the inescapable requirement of religious organisation and leadership." (1981: 103).



Furthermore, Sufism tended to be more tolerant of local customs and better able to incorporate pre-Islamic practices than the scripturalist 'orthodox' version of Islam. This made the *tariqa* a particularly effective vehicle for the spread of Islam, especially in parts of Africa not directly under Arab control.

It seems probable that the *tariqas* only began to exert an influence on East African Islam toward the end of the nineteenth century (Nimtz, 1980: 57; Trimingham, 1964: 93ff). The Qadiriya has had the greatest impact in East Africa, as Trimingham observed (1964: 97), but in certain areas the Shadhiliya dominates. According to Nimtz (1980: 57ff), the Qadiriya in East Africa has three main branches. One of these was established at Zanzibar in 1884 by a sheikh from Somalia, and spread to the mainland. Another branch was located in the Rufiji area, while a third had its origins in Bagamoyo in around 1905. The Shadhiliya came to the East African coast by way of the Comoro Islands and has gained a large following in Kilwa and Zanzibar. The influence of both the Qadiriya and the Shadhiliya has tended to be confined to the coastal Muslims, while among the newly-converted Muslim tribes of the interior the *tariqas* made little headway. The major exception to this, as Trimingham noted, were the Yao Muslims: "Among the neo-Muslims the *tariqas* are almost non-existent and the *dhikr* unknown, except among the Yao and in the towns which all have groups." (1964: 98).

The date and manner by which the Qadiriya and Shadhiliya were introduced to the Yao is not at all clear. It is unlikely that there was any significant influence of the *tariqas* before the turn of the century. Greenstein (1976/77: 30) dates the emergence of a Sufi presence in Nyasaland to the early 1920s, but my own evidence leads me to suggest that there may have been some penetration of practices associated with the *tariqa* before this. A sheikh at Makanjila's informed me that Shadhiliya practices were brought into the area by Arabs at around the turn of the century, and were adopted by some of the most influential sheikhs in the region. Another elderly Yao sheikh who was based at Nkhotakota and was an adherent of the Shadhiliya told me the *tariqa* was introduced to Nyasaland from Mozambique before the end of the nineteenth century by a certain Sheikh Haridi Amlani.

Whatever the exact timing of the introduction of the Shadhiliya to various of the Muslim centres in Nyasaland, it seems that it had a following among the Yao before the Qadiriya began to attract supporters in the region. Most of my informants associated the spread of the Qadiriya in southern Nyasaland with the efforts of Sheikh Sabiti Ngaunje. This Mozambican Yao, who is perceived as the most influential figure in the consolidation of Islam among the Yao, appears to have become acquainted with Qadiriya practices in Zanzibar. Sheikh Sabiti was based in Jalasi's chiefdom to the east of the lake, but he moved throughout southern Nyasaland in the first decades of this century in



his mission to propagate Islam. His support for the Qadiriya was decisive in the rapid spread of its influence among the Yao, and by 1930 the Qadiriya - often referred to simply as the *tariqa* (or *twaliki* in the Yao pronunciation) - far outstripped the Shadhiliya in the number of its Yao adherents.

There is a noteworthy episode in the history of Islam in Nyasaland associated with the introduction of the Qadiriya to Nkhotakota, the large Muslim settlement on the western shore of the lake.<sup>1</sup> The person who is supposed to have propagated the *tariqa* in this region was a woman, Sheikh Mtumwa binti Ali. Greenstein (1976/77: 32-33) has described the career of this remarkable woman. Her mother was a slave from Nyasaland and her father was a Swahili who became the cook of the District Commissioner at Nkhotakota, George Manning. Mtumwa married Manning in 1913, but was widowed shortly afterwards when he died fighting the Germans near Karonga in 1914. She then settled at Zanzibar, where she studied with a Qadiriya sheikh, and returning to Nkhotakota in 1929, she soon attracted an enthusiastic following for the new *tariqa* (Ibid.: 32). One of the current leaders of the Qadiriya at Nkhotakota, Sheikh Ibadi Abdullah, informed me that Sheikh Mtumwa is regarded as the founder of the *tariqa* in that region, while Sheikh Sabiti is recognised as having established it in the Mangochi district.

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<sup>1</sup>Shepperson (1980) has described the history of this, the only important settlement of African Muslims in Malawi that is not predominantly Yao-speaking.

There is no doubt that the success of the Qadiriya in Nyasaland was partly due to the proselytising zeal of sheikhs such as Sabiti and Mtumwa, but a more important factor, I would argue, was that features of the *tariqa* proved to be particularly attractive to the Yao Muslims. Chief among these was the Qadiriya form of *dhikr* (or *sikiri*, as the Yao refer to it). This ritual, along with the use of brightly coloured banners, has become the core of Qadiriya practice in the region, and it remains the key component of Muslim ritual for many of the Yao. It is usually performed in its collective form, which Trimingham described as follows: "The governing motive of the collective *dhikr* is the attainment of spiritual effects through rhythmic physical actions (control of the breath and physical repetitions) accompanied and regulated by vocal and sometimes instrumental music which frees the physical effort from conscious thought. Both thought and will must be suspended if ecstasy is to be achieved." (1964: 97). The Yao followers of the *tariqa* perform *sikiri* on occasions such as *ziyala* (the founder's anniversary), funerals, weddings, and other festivals. Although the Yao *sikiri* is usually performed by a group of young men, it does not exclude other Muslims who may be present, except on occasions like funerals where men and women are segregated. It would be a mistake, I think, to suggest that the *sikiri* practised by the Yao Qadiriya has the purpose and significance which the *dhikr* had for the early Muslim mystics. Yet, as I shall describe, it is an exhilarating and deeply moving performance. The "spiritual effects", as



Trimingham put it, may not be for the Yao what they were for al-Ghazali, but an "inward transformation" or altered state of consciousness is certainly achieved.

The description that follows is of a *sikiri* performance at a Muslim wedding in Makwinja village near Malindi. The ceremony took place outside the mosque on a Sunday afternoon, and was attended by most of the residents of the village as well as a group from the nearby village of the bridegroom. The wedding ceremony began with a procession moving from the east to the west of the mosque in a semi-circle. The bride and groom and their 'marriage sureties' (cf. Mitchell, 1956: 177) were led by a group of young men who formed the core of the *sikiri* circle. These began to go through the motions of the *sikiri* as the procession moved toward the grove of trees to the west of the mosque where the village headman and the *mwaliimu* (there was no person with the title of sheikh in the village) were waiting with the rest of the party. The marriage service was performed by the *mwaliimu*, ending with the payment of a small sum of money (8 Kwacha, the equivalent of £4 in 1986) by the husband to the parents of the bride. This was the signal for the *sikiri* to begin in earnest.

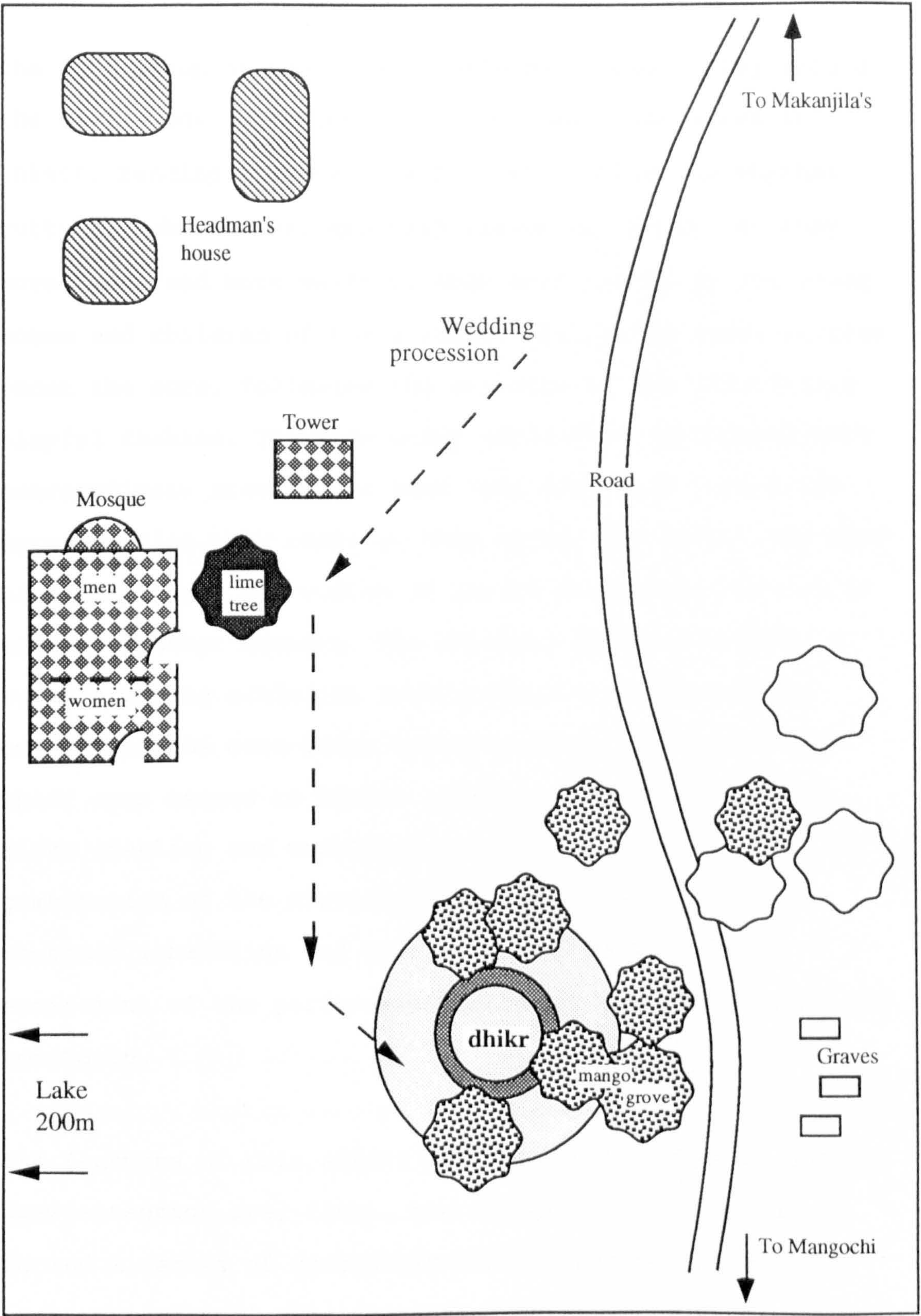


Diagram 2: A wedding at Makwinja Village.



The core group of the *sikiri* performers made a ring around the newly-weds and began to circle them. They moved in unison, bending forward to expel their breath in rhythmic, guttural exhalations, and then rising to inhale. As they moved more and more swiftly, they were joined by the young women and children of the village, who formed outer circles about the core, following the movement of the *sikiri* in a playful fashion. The core group carried on performing with extraordinary stamina for more than two hours, while the outer circles took rests as they tired. The effect was that of a whirlpool; the vortex of *sikiri* performers drawing in eddies of other dancers. The physical effort involved in sustaining the *sikiri* at such intensity must have been great, and the core group became visibly hyperventilated. Their eyes seemed to become enormous, like huge shining disks wheeling and undulating in a disembodied dance. The combination of the circular movement of the group, the rhythmic inhalation and expulsion of breath, and the excitement of the performers made a compelling and powerful spectacle.

The features of this *sikiri* performance to which I wish to draw attention are, first, its integrative nature. It formed a series of concentric circles around the newly-weds, the central ring consisting of the core performers, followed by the younger participants, and finally by the seated elder members of the gathering. Second, the excitement generated by the performance - while in progress

it became the total focus of the occasion, and for the core group the performance clearly had an intensely stimulating effect which diffused outward to the spectators. Third, the lack of an overtly Islamic character to the performance. This last point needs some clarification: The *sikiri* took place outside a mosque, a *mwalimu* was in attendance to officiate at the wedding, and the wedded couple were both Muslims. But although the village headman and the larger part of the village were Muslim, a substantial minority of Christians were in attendance. They, along with some of the Muslim villagers who claimed not to be followers of the *tariqa*, participated in the performance - albeit on the periphery. The *sikiri* was thus accessible and inclusive, open to all ages, to men and women, and to non-Muslims. There was no sheikh to guide the *sikiri*, and the *mwalimu* who was present did not attempt to direct or instruct the performers. In short, the purpose of the *sikiri* seemed less the spiritual enlightenment of the performers than an affirmation of the inclusively Islamic identity of the Yao.

Other aspects of *sikiri* and its significance to the adherents of Sufism in the region became clearer to me while I was at Mpilipili in Makanjila's chiefdom during the month of Ramadan. This month of fasting, which fell over May and June in 1986, was taken very seriously by most of the Muslims in the area. People who normally only prayed on Fridays started attending daily prayers at the mosque and even attending the long evening prayers (called *Taraweh*) that are held only during Ramadan. Almost all of the Muslim



men appeared to be fasting and many of the older ones walked around with a tin in their hand into which they would frequently and ostentatiously spit, demonstrating their zeal for the fast by not even swallowing saliva. I succeeded in fasting for about two weeks, although I found it extremely difficult, and I eventually abandoned it when I became so weak and ill that I realised I was near to collapse. Only a few women and children tried to fast, and it was generally accepted that it was not essential for women to abstain from food for more than a few days and not at all for those with small children. Despite the physical difficulties of fasting - one is not supposed to eat or drink at all between dawn and dusk - there were several very attractive features of Ramadan. The one was the time that people spent together each evening to break the fast. Groups formed at various houses to which guests would be welcomed and at the appropriate time food and drink was brought out and consumed with marked restraint and accompanied by leisurely conversation. The food was always simple - usually just rice porridge and cooked sweet potatoes and bananas with water to drink. I have seldom tasted anything that is as delicious after a day of fasting.

At night there was little chance of sleep in Mpilipili during Ramadan. Any time after midnight, but usually at about two o'clock in the morning, the town would be woken by the sound of clanging and singing that would move to and fro through the town, growing in volume all the time.

Abandoning my bed I went to investigate and found a large group of adolescents and younger children dancing and singing through the town. The melodic clanging was produced by a boy who was striking the head of a hoe with a metal rod, and two other boys had small drums that they were beating to accompany the chiming of the hoe. They and the others were singing one of the most hauntingly beautiful melodies that I have ever heard. This they told me was a performance of *sikiri* that they did each night during Ramadan to wake the other Muslims in good time to eat and wash before the early morning prayers. The dancing that accompanied the singing of the *sikiri* was however quite unlike that which I have described above in the *sikiri* at Makwinja village. It was not at all energetic and was very sporadic, quite unlikely to induce hyperventilation. The whole performance was joyful and playful. As the group moved through the town other children would wake and come out and join them. A few adults came out to watch, and others brought out gifts of food for the performers. Every now and then they stopped and made a fire and rested. Some of the smaller children would use these occasions to form little circles in which they performed a kind of playful parody of the *sikiri* of their elders.

The *sikiri* at Makanjila's, like that at Makwinja, did not have any identifiable words and consisted of the melodic chanting of a single vowel. None of the performers could tell me what the significance of the sound was, and although my reading about Sufism inclined me to interpret



it as a repetition of a derivation of one of the names of God, none of the performers could confirm this to me. When questioned some of them claimed simply that the *sikiri* was in praise of God, but could not say precisely what it meant. Gerhard Kubik has recordings of *sikiri* from this area which consist of short histories of Islam sung in Chiyao.<sup>1</sup> I did not myself come across this sort of *sikiri*, and all of the performances that I saw in Malawi were variations on the two sorts that I have described here. The main difference between these was in the intensity of the performance and in its effects. The ones that I saw at Makanjila's were gentle and tuneful, inducing a relaxed and often playful atmosphere. At Makwinja and in the vicinity of Malindi the *sikiri* was rather more of a serious performance and one that was much more demanding and vigorous with effects that were correspondingly more dramatic. I was told that the difference of these performances of *sikiri* was due to the dominance of the Shadhiliya in one area and the Qadiriya in the other. It was acknowledged by most Muslims that the Shadhiliya had a more restrained form of *sikiri*, and it was considered to be less objectionable than the Qadiriya variant by Muslim opponents of Sufism in Malawi.

It was indeed this difference in the *sikiri* that alerted me to the change in Sufi affiliation when I moved from Malindi to Makanjila's. I later established that while the Muslims

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<sup>1</sup>Gerhard Kubik very kindly played me his recordings of *sikiri* and other songs when I visited him in Vienna. The lyrics of the *sikiri* were repetitions of phrases like "Islam came to us from across the sea" in Chiyao.

at Makanjila's are mainly adherents of the Shadhiliya - except for the followers of the *sukuti* movement who I will describe in the next chapter - all of the other areas that I visited including Makwinja and the other villages around Malindi were dominated by the Qadiriya. The only exception to this that I found was at Nkhotakota where the Shadhiliya and the Qadiriya seemed to have followings that lived in close proximity to each other and mixed together in the town. At mosques that were not more than thirty minutes walk from one another I met sheikhs who were on the one hand members of the Shadhiliya and on the other of the Qadiriya. Elsewhere, however, the two Sufi orders appear to have separated out, with one or the other having established itself in a particular chiefdom. My informants claimed this to be the case, but I do not have the sort of evidence that would allow me to confirm this to be so. Apart from the *sikiri* there were no very obvious differences between followers of the Shadhiliya and those of the Qadiriya, and some of the sheikhs that I spoke to at Makanjila's had lived and taught in Qadiriya areas for periods of their lives without any apparent problems. The only evidence of friction between the leaders or followers of the two Sufi orders in recent times that I found was in Nkhotakota, and as I explained in the introduction, that is an area which is in many ways different to the mainly Yao Muslim districts of southern Malawi that I am more familiar with.



The conflicts that arose among the Yao Muslims were not between followers of different Sufi orders but between Sufis and other Muslims, but before going on to deal with that it will be useful for me to give some more details of the practice and organisation of the followers of the *tariqa* in Malawi. In general the Muslims in Malawi conform to the trend that several writers about Islam have described, with Sufism stronger in the rural areas than in the towns. This however is only true of the larger towns that were established by the colonial government, like Zomba, Blantyre and Mangochi town. In the towns of the Yao chiefs like Mpilipili and Mponda's (these are usually described as villages but are really quite large settlements) Sufism appears to have thrived and indeed these were the centres of the activity of the *tariqa*, where the senior sheikhs were based and where in the past they had performed services for the chiefs in return for their patronage. These were also the places where the large *madrasas* were based and where *waalimu* (Muslim teachers) were trained and where it was sometimes even possible to get the title of sheikh. In Mpilipili there were five senior sheikhs at the time of my visit, although one was acknowledged to be the leader of the Shadhiliya in the area. It was difficult for me to determine the nature of their relationship with the chief, since the previous chief (Makanjila VIII Mdala) had died a few months before my arrival and a new chief had not yet been agreed upon. Makanjila Mdala had in any case been considered by most in the area as an appointment of the Malawi Congress Party

rather than the rightful inheritor of the title. It did not seem that the sheikhs were much involved in the discussions about succession to the title, but it was my impression that few people were keen to get caught up in a process that finally had to be approved by the unpopular local Party chairman.

In smaller villages there were often close kin links between the headmen and Muslim clerics. For instance the sheikh at Makumba village just to the north of Makwinja was the son of the village headman. In an area where the succession to the title of headman favours his sisters' sons, it seemed that many headmen compensated for this by sending their sons to train with good sheikhs.<sup>1</sup> My evidence is far from conclusive on this point, but many of the sheikhs and *waalimu* that I interviewed were the sons rather than the sisters' sons of chiefs or headmen. There is however considerable mobility among the Muslim clerics in Malawi, as indeed there is among most Yao Muslims. Almost all of the sheikhs and *waalimu* that I interviewed had travelled abroad and had studied with different sheikhs at various places inside and outside Malawi. The following short biography of a sheikh from a village in Makanjila's chiefdom gives some indication of the trajectory of many village clerics: Sheikh Abbas Tawaliki was born in 1936 at Ntwana village. His father was a sheikh from Katuli (a

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<sup>1</sup>There is some complexity in inheritance of titles, especially with the considerable interference from the Malawi Congress Party, but the situation remains on the whole as Mitchell (1956: 160) described it, and a matrilineal relative is always chosen in preference to any other.



chief's village) and had a *madrasa* there. Sheikh Abbas was born at Ntwana village where his mother lived, while his father spent much of his time at Katuli where he had another wife. Sheikh Abbas began his studies at his father's *madrasa* in Katuli, but was later sent by his father to study with Sheikh Abdul Sabiti (the son of the famous Sheikh Sabiti Ngaunje) who was then based near to Mangochi town. The father of Sheikh Abbas told him to study with Sheikh Abdul Sabiti since he (the father) had studied under Sheikh Sabiti Ngaunje. After training with Sheikh Abdul Sabiti he returned to help his father until 1973 when he went to Zambia and then to Zimbabwe to look for work. He returned to his mother's village after several years and has remained there. Most of his income is derived from fishing and his garden, and he claims that he earns very little from his position as sheikh in the village. He gets small amounts of money for officiating at funerals and weddings, and he has a *madrasa* but he claims that the parents of the children that he teaches there pay him very infrequently and that he runs it as an act of charity.

It was clear that most sheikhs and *waalimu* were not able to generate much income from their activities as Muslim clerics, and most had travelled abroad at some time or another in their lives to seek their fortune. Makwinja village did not have a sheikh based in the village at the time that I was there, although there was a *mwaliimu* who took charge of the mosque and with a young assistant started up a *madrasa* next to the mosque. He also officiated

at weddings and funerals and was jokingly referred to by the villagers as 'Sheikh Blyvoor', because he had a grocery called Blyvoor (the name of the mine that he had worked on in South Africa - an Afrikaans word meaning to stay ahead). He had worked on the mine intermittently over a period of years and had more visible signs of wealth than anybody else in the village, having brought back a van from South Africa and started a small grocery store. It seemed likely that he would return to South Africa again, and it was not clear to me who would take charge of the mosque if he left. There had been no *madrasa* at Makwinja when I arrived, and I had doubts about whether the one that he had started would survive for long when the rains came, as it was located under the trees next to the mosque.

The mosque at Makwinja village was similar to the other village mosques that I visited in several respects. It was near to the house of the headman, it was divided into two rooms for the use of men and women and it was decorated in a crude but fanciful way reminiscent of mosque architecture in coastal centres like Zanzibar. The room for women was at the rear of the mosque and separated from the male section by a wall that was perforated with small holes so that they could hear the *imam* (the person who leads the prayers). I did not come across any evidence of women clerics among the Muslims in Malawi apart from the story of Sheikh Mtumwa, although it was evident that among the new reformists that I describe in a later chapter women were beginning to be more involved in leadership roles. Among followers of the



*tariqas* in the villages women did not appear to be concerned with Islamic practices. Very few of the women at Makwinja ever attended prayers at the mosque, even on Fridays or during Ramadan. It was extremely unusual to see a woman in the village wearing a covering on her head, or even bothering to try and cover her limbs, although the women that did occasionally attend Friday prayers would always drape their head and shoulders with a *chitenje* (cloth) while going to and from the mosque. Men frequently wore a skullcap, especially when attending prayers at the mosque, and the sheikhs often affected elaborate robes and head gear.

Most of the Muslim men at Makwinja village regularly attended the main Friday prayer, but for the rest of the week the mosque remained empty at the five daily times of prayer. I attended the Friday prayers at Makwinja on several occasions at the invitation of the villagers, and was struck by the relaxed and colourful rituals. Before the prayer the *mwali*mu's assistant climbed the little tower next to the mosque to sing out the call to prayer. It was expected that all who entered would wash their hands and feet in the prescribed manner using water from a barrel outside the entrance. The entry of the *imam* was preceded by that of a boy carrying a staff that he held between his toes and his hand. This was a custom that Muslims who were not part of the *tariqa* liked to sneer at, but none could tell me its significance. Most of the men kept rosaries hanging in the mosque that they would use during the *khutba*

(sermon) which was always delivered in Chiyao. At the end of the prayers all the men chanted the profession of faith ("There is no God but God, and Muhammed is his His Prophet", in Arabic) and formed a circle to shake hands with one another. Apart from these minor details there was no great variation in the form of the prayers that I observed in Shadhiliya, Qadiriya and reformist mosques, although in the next chapter I outline a dispute that developed over one aspect of the Friday prayer between followers of the *tariqa* and the *sukuti* movement.

Except during Ramadan, on Fridays, at festivals and rites of passage their adherence to Islam did not appear to greatly affect the daily lives of the village Sufis. All avoided the eating of pork and most would not drink alcohol in public, but were it not for the presence of the little mosque in almost every village it would be easy for a casual visitor to pass through the area and not realise that these people were Muslims. It would be a serious mistake however to assume, as some observers have done, that this lack of visible Islamic zeal implies a lack of commitment to their form of religious practice. The loose and flexible organisation of the *tariqa* with its easy accommodation of Yao customs has built a very loyal following among the villagers. As I will show in subsequent chapters, to undermine the *tariqa* is to transform and possibly destroy the Yao identity that it was instrumental in constructing. The alliance of the chiefs and the sheikhs and the legitimation of the structures of Yao political



authority by the ritual power of the exponents of the *tariqa* has been central to the modern history of the Yao. The parallels between the organisation of tribal and religious authority are obvious. There is in both cases a lack of any central authority and instead a dispersed hierarchy of leadership that owes allegiance not so much to one another as to a central ritual. Sufism has been a useful means of maintaining the tribal identity of the Yao, but it has been more than that too.

Gellner (1981: 115) has pointed out that there are two sorts of Sufism - the one being that of the learned mystics who can be said to have followed the path of the great Sufi practitioners while the other is the rural Sufism of mostly illiterate tribal Muslims such as the Yao. In the second case, the mystical aspect of Sufism is more or less a by-product of the activity of the *tariqa*, which is there to provide organisation and leadership along with rituals that may be easily incorporated into an already existing ritual system. What is interesting about the way that Sufi rituals move into the pre-Islamic system is the way that these rituals have a striking similarity to many of the rituals and dances that were already in use. It is possible to suggest as the missionaries did that these rituals were simply grafted onto the pre-existing Yao rituals.

Furthermore, the altered state of consciousness that is produced by the hyper-ventilation in the *dhikr* is not dissimilar to the states produced by dances in other non-Islamic rituals. It would be too facile to dismiss the

*tariqa* as merely a way of augmenting tribal structures. It has also been a bridge, a path between one apprehension of God and another, and it is not for me to say whether in the crossing their experience of God was not as vivid as the greatest of mystics. Sufism, like all mysticism, is about ultimately about communion. Scripturalism disrupts that but it also provides a route to more global and less exclusive kind of communion.



## 9

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*SUKUTI*

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Some form of Sufism had spread among most of the Yao Muslims in the first couple of decades of this century, and there does not appear to have been any perception that Sufi practices were anything but an extension of accepted Islamic practice. Indeed, the introduction of Sufism was an important part of the conversion process in that it supported and gave legitimacy to the tolerant and inclusive nature of the first phase of Islam. Most of the leading sheikhs had been enlisted to Sufism and had been actively propagating Sufi practices, but it is evident that there were differences in the versions of Sufism that took root in various places. Most important was the difference between followers of the Qadiriya and those of the Shadhiliya. These differences may have given rise to a certain amount of tension, especially where the two Sufi orders emerged in the same place as happened at Nkhotakota. However, there is little evidence of any serious conflict among the Yao Muslims on matters relating specifically to religious practice until about 1930. Then a series of

conflicts erupted among them, and the tensions that were expressed then have persisted in much the same form until the present time.

The controversies initially revolved around funerals. The feasts which follow the burial of a Yao adherent of the *tariqa* are known as *sadaqa* (an Arabic term usually denoting voluntary alms given by Muslims), and this term is also applied by the Yao to feasts commemorating their ancestors. A central feature of the *sadaqa* or funeral feast is the performance of *sikiri*. The disputes have at times been very heated, and it is significant that they have tended to revolve around the performance of *sikiri* at these occasions rather than the merging of an ancestor cult with Islamic practice. One of the earliest of these controversies erupted in Jalasi's chiefdom in the 1930s. Mitchell refers to it in *The Yao Village* (1956: 51-52) and suggests that the opposing factions in the dispute reflect a cleavage between chiefdoms. An interview in his field notes sheds further light on the matter. Recalling a dispute that took place in the area in 1937, his informant says:

"... a long time ago there was a law of Islam which says that if a burial takes place they take a flag and they put it on the door where there is a death and they read from it, and they take knives and dance while the body is in the house. When they have buried the body others are doing *skiri* [*sikiri*] and its dance." [He goes on to describe the emergence of the opposing view, the protagonist of which was Sheikh Ali bin Salimu]: "Ali Bisalimu returned from his journey [to the coast] with many *itabu* [books] and he started selling them here. Then Ali Bisalimu took a big *itabu* its name *nsafu* [the Quran] which gave



the old history and he found the words that putting the flag on the door and doing *sjiri* [*sikiri*] at the funeral is a huge sin. The Lord does not like dancing at the funeral. But to pray and silently, and to grumble in the heart alone, until they bury the body.... Then Ali Bisalimu when he found these words he started to tell all the Moslems." [Not surprisingly, Ali bin Salimu met with some resistance from the local adherents of the *tariqa*, and in 1938 Chief Jalasi called on him to explain himself. He is said to have replied]: "I am making *sukutu* (silence) at the funeral because at the funeral of Muhammed he did not see *sikiri*." [But Jalasi retorted]: "We don't want *sukutu* in this land. *Cinasala* [in this context Islam] of the flag came here long ago..." [My glosses].<sup>1</sup>

The crux of the dispute, it is clear, is the use of *sikiri* and the Qadiriya banners at funerals. This usage is sanctioned by custom and the chief, and is opposed on the authority of the Scriptures. What appears to be emerging here is the germ of the great polarity in Islam between Sufism and scripturalism. The tendency toward scripturalist reform in Islam is represented here by the movement which came to be known in Malawi as the *sukuti*. The word *sukuti* is derived from a Swahili (and Arabic) term meaning to be quiet. Although there are similar movements in East Africa and possibly elsewhere, I have not been able to find another one with the same name

The nature of the *sukuti* movement has generally been misunderstood by writers who have commented on it. Anderson, who visited Nyasaland to research his survey of Islamic law in Africa, assumed that the *sukuti* were a

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<sup>1</sup>Papers of J. Clyde Mitchell, 21/1 (Nmwera, 25.11.1948), Rhodes House Library, Oxford.

branch of the Qadiriya (1954: 169) and Trimingham (1964: 98) followed him in this mistake. Greenstein (1976/77: 34) mentions the dispute outlined above, but links *sukuti* with the Shadhiliya - an interpretation which is almost certainly incorrect but understandable given the more restrained nature of Shadhiliya practice and the disputes that had arisen between the Shadhiliya and the Qadiriya at Nkhotakota.

My own analysis would suggest that *sukuti* is a reform movement and that it sprang up not as a schismatic offshoot of one of the Sufi orders but in opposition to Sufism. More precisely, it is a series of reform movements opposing the influence of the *tariqas* in the region. Informants frequently described the *sukutis* as 'anti-Sufi', and in fact I was first alerted to the real significance of the *sukutis* when they were given that label at a meeting of the Theological Society of Malawi that I attended in Zomba early on in my fieldwork. The small group of Muslims who were attending the meeting responded to my characterisation of the *sukutis* as a branch of Qadiriya and were adamant that *sukuti* has always been an anti-Sufi movement. My subsequent research, and particularly that in Makanjila's chiefdom, convinced me of the accuracy of their portrayal of the *sukuti* movement.

In the model of the development of Islam in Malawi that I developed in the introductory section of this work I claimed that the emergence of the *sukuti* marked the



beginning of the second phase of Islamic transformation. I characterised this phase as that of internal reform, and I need to qualify that somewhat before giving further details of the organisation and activity of the *sukutis*. There is no doubt that the *sukutis* see themselves as a movement of religious reform, but it is perhaps not quite clear why I have placed them in a separate category to another movement of reform, or why I emphasise the internal or endogenous nature of the *sukutis*. The explanation for my claim that the *sukutis* are quite different from the new reformists is partly that the members of these movements see themselves as different, although this is stressed by the new reformists far more than by *sukutis*, but more importantly, as I will try to show, their strategies, practices and organisational structures are different. As for the stress on *internal* reform, the point is not so much to suggest that the movement grew up more or less separately from other Muslim reform movements elsewhere, but that it happened as a result of factors - or contradictions - inherent in the first phase of Islam. It is internal in the sense of being a reaction to features of existing Islamic practice on the basis of other aspects of that practice and without any major external influence.

There is indeed evidence of other reform movements growing up at around this time in other parts of East Africa. Kiwanuka (1973: 30ff) has given an account of an anti-Sufi movement in Bukoba District of Tanzania, as has Nimtz (1980: 79). Lienhardt's discussion of a conflict among

Muslims at Kilwa Kivinje (1980: 298ff) seems to indicate the presence of a similar tendency there. However, there is little to suggest any systematic link between these movements or for that matter with the growth of the Wahhabi reform movement in parts of West Africa.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the East African reform movements such connection and cross-fertilisation as may have existed between them does not appear to have any great influence on their development. In all the accounts of the disputes between the Sufis and the *sukutis*, both by the protagonists and by observers, there is no indication of an appeal being made to similar movements outside Malawi or even of a consciousness of being part of a larger movement. The *sukutis* themselves lay stress on the point that their objection to Sufi practices does not come from any other authority except the Scriptures. This is made quite explicit by Mitchell's informant who recounted the story of the origins of the *sukutis* in Jalasi's chieftdom and the role of its leader Ali bin Salimu. He makes it quite clear that Ali bin Salimu derived his ideas from the Book and not from any of the sheikhs that he had associated with at the coast:

"But to dance and to sing and to jump about the Lord does not want it in his eyes. Ali Bisalimu found this in the *nsafu* [Quran] and he did not find it in Shehe Njendaheli [a sheikh at the coast].... Atibu [his opponent] said: 'And when Njendaheli died did not the people do *sikiri*.' Ali Bisalimu said: 'They

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<sup>1</sup>For a recent account of the Wahhabis see Niezen (1987). They are associated with the teachings of the Saudi Arabian reformist Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and seem to have become a force in West Africa after 1940.



made *sikiri*.' Atibu said: 'Perhaps Njendaheli was your *shehe* and then where did you get these laws?' Ali Bisalimu said: 'I got it from the *nsafu*.'<sup>1</sup>

The dispute which is described by Mitchell's informant became sufficiently serious for a mediator - a senior sheikh from Zanzibar - to be brought to Nyasaland to attempt to reconcile the parties. Anderson reports that on the question of the performance of *sikiri* at funerals a compromise was accepted and was signed and witnessed by the District Commissioner (1954: 169-170). Mitchell's recollection of the mediation is that it had also to deal with the legality of eating the meat of the hippopotamus. The sheikh decided that it was permissible to eat the meat if the animal was properly slaughtered which, given that a hippopotamus is considered to be more dangerous than even a crocodile, was not an entirely satisfactory solution.<sup>2</sup>

This was far from being the end of friction between the *sukutis* and the followers of the *tariqa*, which persists to the present time. In Makwinja village near Malindi, there was a debate about the form of the Friday prayers which reflected a more heated dispute at Chowe, the chief's village. The *sukutis* claimed that it was wrong to perform both the Friday prayer and the usual midday prayer, as is the custom of the followers of the Qadiriya in the area.<sup>3</sup> The *sukutis* near Malindi were supported by Sheikh Kassim

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<sup>1</sup>Papers of J. Clyde Mitchell, 21/1 (Namwera, 25.11.1948), Rhodes House Library, Oxford. The glosses are mine.

<sup>2</sup>Conversation with J. Clyde Mitchell, Oxford, 18 January 1988.

<sup>3</sup>Kiwanuka (1973: 30) reports that this was also an issue in Bukoba District.

Makumba from a nearby village, who had studied in Zanzibar and who was respected for his learning even by the adherents of the *tariqa*, but his arguments against the Qadiriya practices tended to be simply ignored rather than actively opposed. In Chowe, though, there was enough tension between the parties for the *sukutis* to threaten to break away and build their own mosque.

That indeed is what happened at Mpilipili, the capital of Chief Makanjila. The majority of Muslims in Makanjila's chiefdom are followers of the Shadhiliya, but a dispute between the sheikhs of the *tariqa* and a *sukuti* group led by a nephew of the revered Sheikh Abdallah Mkwanda resulted in the *sukutis* hiving off and building their own mosque. The *sukuti* leader, Sheikh Mubalaka Mbwana, informed me that here again the point of contention was the conduct of funerals and the use of *sikiri*, although he acknowledged that the Shadhiliya *sikiri* is more restrained than that of the Yao Qadiriya. The issue came to a head a couple of years before my arrival in the area, and the chief at that time, Makanjila VIII Mdala, called a debate between the two parties who were then still sharing the central mosque adjacent to his residence. A compromise could not be arrived at, and since the chief sided with the Shadhiliya sheikhs, the *sukutis* decided to build their own mosque. This was situated on the outskirts of Mpilipili, next to the home of the *sukuti* leader. He had also started a *madrassa* for the children of his followers, and it was clear that he and the supporters of the *sukuti* had decided that a



reconciliation with the main body of Muslims in the town was impossible. The central mosque and *madrassa* remained under the control of the Shadhiliya sheikhs, who commanded the allegiance of the majority of Muslims in the town.

The leader of the *sukuti* movement at Makanjila's gave me an account of his life and his religious convictions that is worth recounting. Sheikh Mubalaka Mbwana's story went like this: He was born at Mpilipili in 1910. His father was a village headman of Mkwanda village in Makanjila's chiefdom. His father's name was Mbwana Mkwanda and he came from Mozambique with Makanjila. However, he began to quarrel with Makanjila and was forced to flee to Malindi. He then trained to become a sheikh with his brother, the influential Sheikh Abdallah Mkwanda, and he also made a trip to Zanzibar to continue with his Islamic studies. He settled at Malindi where he died in 1937. After his father's death Mubalaka left Malindi and went to Bulawayo where he worked in a store. In 1947 he returned to Makanjila's where he finally became a sheikh, following in his father's footsteps. Like his father and uncle, Sheikh Abdallah Mkwanda, he was a member of the Shadhiliya. He was for a time in charge of the main mosque at Mpilipili but he fell out with the other sheikhs when he began to criticise the performance of *sikiri*. and other practices that he considers to be wrong (he would not specify what the other practices were, but said he cannot accept the way that the Shadhiliya conduct funerals). He claims that it was through learning and trying to follow the way of the Prophet that

he became dissatisfied with the Shadhiliya and decided to become a *sukuti*. He tried to work together with the sheikhs of the Shadhiliya but they forced him out and that was why he and his followers have built their own mosque and *madrasa*.

The other side of the story of the dispute was detailed for me by Sheikh Abbas Tawaliki whose life story I outlined in the previous chapter. His version went like this: The problems began in 1980 when some sheikhs who had studied in Zanzibar and elsewhere started to criticise the practices of the other Muslims in Makanjila's. There was a meeting to try and settle the dispute, but although members of the Muslim Association from Blantyre attended the meeting to try and mediate, the two sides could still not agree. The main problem was about funerals. Some people (those that follow *sukuti*) say there should be no singing and praying at funerals. The word *sukuti* can be applied to all those who like to be quiet at funerals and at prayers and it comes from Arabic. The sheikhs supporting the *sukutis* were Sheikh Mubalaka Mbwana, Sheikh Yusuf of Bakili village and Sheikh Mustafa Saidi. These three continued interfering in the activities of the other sheikhs and the followers of the Shadhiliya until eventually they were forced to go and complain to the chief. Chief Makanjila said that each of the disputing sides must choose a sheikh to represent their followers. Sheikh Mubalaka was chosen by the *sukuti* and he, Sheikh Abbas, was chosen for the Shadhiliya. The two of them had a public debate and he emerged victorious. From



that time onwards the *sukutis* were defeated in Makanjila's and the chief told them to stop bothering the other Muslims. That is why they have to now build their own small mosques for themselves and their followers.

Certainly it seems that the *sukuti* had suffered a setback, but the opinion of Sheikh Abbas that they were a spent force in Makanjila's was not convincing. The *madrasa* that Sheikh Mubalaka had set up for the children of his followers seemed to be attracting almost as many as the *madrasa* that the Shadhiliya sheikhs were running at the central mosque. However, it was also obvious that after almost fifty years of opposition to the followers of the *tariqas* in Malawi, the *sukuti* movement has not been able to really undermine the power of the Sufis in the villages. At Makanjila's and elsewhere the conflicts that I heard about were about the same sort of issues that Clyde Mitchell had encountered, and the disputes took a similar course with the chief siding with the *tariqa* and the *sukutis* thwarted but unbeaten. Apparently the *sukutis* were not in a position to deal a decisive blow to the *tariqa* but nor were they going to stop their irksome criticism of the practices of its followers. They have continually emerged in different parts of the region, often as members of one of the Sufi orders who have reacted against its practices and who wish to eradicate its central rituals. It is quite striking how with very little variation across time and place the issues that are raised by each new outbreak of *sukuti* activism resemble the others, and yet at the same time there appears

to be no central organisation or even an attempt to combine the various groups into one powerful anti-Sufi movement. Those that are labelled *sukutis* or have themselves adopted the name of 'quietist' seem unable to move beyond the criticism of Sufi practices to transform themselves into a strong and unified movement of Islamic reform. In their descriptions of themselves and their motivation for opposing Sufism it is quite clear that they see their objective as one of reform. They always make reference to their desire to follow the Scriptures as their spur for action against the *tariqa* and its practices, but they are unable to develop a fully coherent critique of local Sufism and they appeal to the existence rather than the content of the Scriptures as a corrective to the practices they object to.

The thread that runs through virtually all of the narratives of *sukuti* activity is their opposition to certain aspects of the conduct of funerals, so I shall describe a funeral that I attended at Makwinja. It was a funeral that was conducted by followers of the Qadiriya, and although it was not the occasion of any particular tension in the village, I think it sheds some light on the dynamics of the relationship between the Sufis and *sukutis*. It was the funeral of a small boy named Ali who was the son of a couple that lived directly opposite my house at Makwinja. Melika, the father of the child, was a fisherman who I was especially fond of. The little boy, who was two and a half years old, had been ill for a couple of months



and despite being treated at the hospital had grown progressively weaker. He died at about five o'clock one morning, and I was alerted to the fact about an hour later when two of the father's relatives woke me to ask if they could borrow some money to buy a shroud for the child. A couple of hours later one of the relatives came to take me to the funeral. About thirty men, mostly relatives from the village, were sitting on the veranda of Melika's house while about the same number of women were gathered in the courtyard behind the house. The village headman was among the group of men, as was the *mwali*mu from the village and his assistant. The *mwali*mu led the group of men in a moving dirge-like chant of the Muslim profession of faith (The Arabic formula "There is no God but God, and Muhammed is his Prophet"). The women did not participate in the singing, and seemed given to sobbing instead.

After some time a small bier was placed outside the house. It was made from wood and was rectangular in shape with a triangular arch over it and handles at the front and back. It was covered with a pink sheet. Meanwhile, as I later was told, some of Melika's male relatives held a meeting to discuss a problem that some of them considered might arise from the fact that Melika's wife (the mother of the child) is a Christian and that her kin could object to the child having a Muslim funeral. It was decided to go ahead with the ceremony since the mother had herself agreed to it. The bier was carried into the house where the body of the child had been washed and covered in a white sheet. This task had

been done by male relatives, and I was told that if the child had been a girl it would have been done by women. The body was placed in the bier and it was carried outside and placed in front of the house facing to the East. The group of men gathered around the bier and the *mwali*mu stood behind it and raising his hands to the side of his head he repeated the Arabic formula "God is great" three times. The others stood in silence and then lifted the bier and set off for toward the burial site (see Diagram 2 in the previous chapter where the graves are shown in relation to the mosque). As the group of men departed with the bier some of the women ran out of the courtyard behind us and began to wail and cry loudly, but they did not follow us along the road to the grave. The men carrying the bier continually changed place with one another and with others in the procession.

We arrived at the graves beneath the trees on the opposite side of the road that runs past the mosque and I saw that a grave had been dug, presumably earlier that morning. It was about five feet deep with a smaller trench at the bottom. The men gathered round the grave and two of Melika's brothers climbed into the grave and sheltered themselves under a pink sheet. The bier was placed next to the grave and the body was passed under the pink sheets and into the grave in such a way that it did not become visible. Small logs of wood were then passed to the two men in the grave who placed them over the body and then smeared mud over them to form a little sort of cell around the body. To my



horror somebody then suggested that I should climb into the grave and take a closer look at what was happening. I quickly demurred but was overcome with shame and disgust at this sudden reminder that my business there was to observe and record and not simply to mourn the death of a child. Nobody else seemed bothered by the suggestion and the ceremony went on. The two men climbed out of the grave and after the *mwali* had sprinkled a bit of sand into it some of the others quickly shovelled in the earth until a small rectangular mound had formed over the grave. This was sprinkled with water, and the *mwali* then led the group in a recitation of the Fatiha (the opening part of the Quran). The group then squatted down and chanted the profession of faith as before, and then dispersed. Some of the close relatives returned with Melika to his house while the others went about their business. A couple of the brothers placed some bits of foliage plucked from the mango trees on the grave before leaving.

The men that returned to the house sat down again on the veranda and were served the soft porridge that completed the *sadaqa* (feast) of the first part of the funeral ceremony. The *mwali* then took his leave, and just a few of the close kin of the family remained. The reduced group of kin stayed at the house with Melika and his wife for three days and nights. The men slept on the veranda and the women in the courtyard. Each day the *mwali* returned for another *sadaqa*. Incense was burned, the men sang and porridge was served on each occasion. After the third

occasion (*sadaqa tatu*) the relatives left and went home. After forty days one last *sadaqa* was held at Melika's house to end the period of mourning. My impression of the whole process of the funeral was that it was dignified and moving, and this was my experience of other funerals that I saw in the vicinity although I did not observe any others from the beginning to the end as I did with the funeral of Melika's child. It seemed to me that perhaps the rituals had been of a more restrained nature than usual, although I was assured by other villagers that it was quite a normal ceremony. It certainly was not the kind of noisy affair that Anderson (1954: 169) described as a typical Qadiriya funeral, and I suspected that perhaps the vigorous form of the *sikiri* had been dropped from the proceedings out of deference to a couple of senior kinsmen who I knew to be *sukuti* supporters and maybe also because of the anxiety about the mother's Christian sensibilities. I never saw the energetic *sikiri* performed at funerals and since there were a lot of funerals that took place while I was at Makwinja and at Makanjila's it is possible that the influence of the *sukutis* has been to tone down the funerals of the *tariqas*.

It is with small victories of this sort that the *sukuti* movement is going to have to content itself. It simply does not have the sort of strategy that would seriously threaten the following of the *tariqas*, and it does not even have an attractive alternative to the Sufi rituals. The practice of the *sukutis* is a kind of pared down version of that of the Sufis rather than a completely different vision of Islam.



Many of the moving and comforting features of the funeral that I have described, like the singing and the vigil at the house, are frowned upon by the *sukutis*. They have an idea that Islamic practice should be austere and done by the Book, so to speak, but have not managed to articulate this in an integrated Scripturalist doctrine and programme of action. They also seemed ambivalent in their attitude towards the many aspects of Yao ritual and custom that Sufism tolerates. In theory they have to repudiate these as being non-Islamic, but in practice they are unable to be firm in their denunciation because they do not aspire to an Islamic way of life that has moved completely beyond the confines of the Yao Muslim identity. That vision of a completely transformed Islamic identity and the programme to implement it is what in my view distinguishes the new reformists from the *sukutis*, but I will deal with that more fully in Chapter 11. It is slightly fanciful to characterise the *sukuti* movement, as I have in the model of this thesis, as a sort of blind and groping assertion of the power of the Book as though it were an infant trying to find its feet. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which it can be seen as the consequence of the experience of people who understand that the Book is important but are not yet in a position to connect that understanding to an ideological system of *why* the Book is central as is the case with the new reformists.

The effect of the *tariqas* on the Yao was in general cohesive and integrative at the level of chiefdoms and

villages, while the emergence of the *sukuti* or reformist movement was deeply divisive. The performance of *sikiri* was a powerful mechanism of social cohesion among adherents of the Yao *tariqas*, integrating with the pre-Islamic ritual system and reinforcing the authority of the chiefs and headmen who associated themselves with the Sufi sheikhs. The *sukutis*, on the other hand, reacted against the ritual system sustained by the *tariqas*. Their leaders tend to be associated with the Islamic centres outside Malawi where they acquired their new understanding of the scriptures and, in some cases, literacy in Arabic. I explore the complex influence of writing in the following chapters, but it should be clear that Muslims who can claim direct access to the teaching of the Prophet through their ability to read the Scriptures have less need of the system in which the Islam of the *tariqa* and the Yao social and ritual structure mutually reinforced one-another. As the leader of the *sukutis* at Makanjila's stated it, "We follow the way of the Prophet, not the way of Shadhiliya".



## 10

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## SCRIPT AND THE SCRIPTURES

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The Prayer Book does not give ignorant persons any idea of an unseen Being addressed, it looks more like reading or speaking to the book: kneeling and praying with eyes shut is better than our usual way of holding Divine service.

David Livingstone

Part of that heady mixture of commerce and Christianity that followed Livingstone to the shores of the Nyasa was something that the missionaries considered to be one of their main attractions - literacy. Imagine then their disappointment when they found that they had competition as purveyors of writing, and that their Book and its associated system of script was being treated with a lack of interest and sometimes with scorn. Even more galling to them was the fact that their competitors - Muslim traders and *waalimu* (teachers) from the coast - were not only spreading a religion to rival their own, but that it was not even the real thing that they had to contend with.

Their perception of the Islamic practice which was being adopted was that it was a mere simulacrum of Islam.

Worst of all from the point of view of the missionaries, was that this 'spurious' form of Islam made few demands upon its converts and was for that reason all the more seductive and insidious. Another member of the UMCA made the point thus: "The follower of the Crescent has adapted his religion much more to the surroundings of the African than has the European, and has interwoven some of the immoral dances of the black man into the initiation ceremonies of his belief .... The Mohammedan teacher has many advantages over the Christian. In the first instance, the son of Islam is not asked to renounce much in the way of evil. He finds that the UMCA teacher, on the other hand, is very clear in his denunciation of sin."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, their adoption of a religion of the Book enabled the new converts to have a sense of equality and even superiority to the Christians: "They speak like Mr Rudyard Kipling's Bandalog: 'Yes, our fathers used to be in darkness, but we are enlightened and free. Look at us; we too pray, we too have a book; we are now educated and free.'" (Johnson, 1900: 55). The significance of writing and the Scriptures in conversion is made very clear in an anecdote which the missionary W.P.Johnson recounts in his memoirs. He recalls a conversation with a Muslim convert at Makanjila's in 1888, in which they discussed a mutual acquaintance named Edwin:

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<sup>1</sup>A.G.De La Pryme: 'Increase of Mohammedanism at Nyasa' Central Africa, 1903, 67.



He spoke to me of Edwin in the following terms: 'He had been taught to read in the manner of Chuma.' Chuma, it may be recollected, was Livingstone's servant who took us to Masasi, and these words show both how well he was known and how big a part the question of reading played in a native's initiation, whether into Mohammedanism or into Christianity. (Johnson, 1924: 155)

Jack Goody suggests that the acquisition of literacy may often be a motive for conversion: "In fact the written word, the use of a new method of communication, may itself sometimes provide its own incentive for conversion, irrespective of the specific content of the Book; for those religions are not only seen as 'higher' because their priests are literate and can read as well as hear God's word, but they may provide their congregation with the possibility of becoming literate themselves." (1986: 5). The historian Edward Alpers (1972: 186) claimed that this sort of factor may have been operating in the conversion of the Yao chiefs to Islam, and that they were able to set up an alternative system of education to that provided by the Christian missionaries. But in fact there is little evidence to support the idea that a desire for literacy was a significant motive in Yao conversions to Islam, and my own work disposes me to take the view that political factors - opposition to the British and the termination of the slave trade - were central to the dynamics of conversion. It is one of the puzzles that I want to explore here that although the Yao who converted to Islam did in theory acquire a Book and an alphabetic system of writing,

their use of these could hardly be described as a general spread of literacy. It is my intention in this chapter, which functions as a sort of digression from the unfolding narrative of Islamic change, to explore more fully some of the ways that writing has been used by the Yao Muslims before going on to discuss the emergence of modern scripturalism in the next chapter.

Soon after their conversion the Yao Muslims found themselves isolated from the rest of the Muslim world and inside a British-controlled and increasingly Christian-dominated protectorate. Although several of the chiefs are reported to have employed Swahili scribes in the slaving era and the association of Islam with writing and books must have been well established, the use of writing in Arabic as a means of communication was not at all straightforward, as another of Johnson's anecdotes reveals:

Kazembe [a Yao chief] was willing to help us, and set his secretary (one Abdallah, a somewhat notorious character) and another scribe to write letters to Mkalawili. Such letters are much like some that we read in Nehemiah; they consist chiefly of formal salutations, but each has a tiny kernel of practical matter. The two scribes wrote on their knees, sitting down at an impossible angle but producing grand curves and a really neat writing. Kazembe rather spoilt the effect by saying: 'We had better send some one to tell Mkalawili what the letters mean.' Abdallah demurred to this, but finally agreed to go; not, of course, to make the writing clear, but to add politeness and personal presence. (1924: 199)



Nor does it seem that the 'contents' or doctrine of the Quran were of much interest to the new converts.<sup>1</sup> To the extent that the Book (i.e. the Islamic Scriptures) featured in this early phase of the development of Islam, it is as part of a ritual system in which it operates as a sort of fetish, a source of power rather than of doctrine. As I tried to show in previous chapters, Islamic practice revolved around a few central rituals which are often merely transformed versions of pre-Islamic Yao rituals. Most important of these was the initiation ceremony for boys. By means of the introduction of complete rather than partial circumcision, and changing the name of the ceremony from *lupanda* to *jando* (the term used on the coast), the Yao initiation ceremony in a largely unaltered form became a method of induction into Islam.

There are two points to which I want to draw attention here. The first is that conversion to Islam did not give rise to wide-spread literacy in Arabic.<sup>2</sup> There are still very few Yao Muslims who can read and write Arabic, and even those sheikhs and *waalimu* (teachers) who are able to recite and inscribe texts from the Quran are usually unable to translate them: the 'meaning' of the Scriptures is relatively unimportant - it is their physical manifestation that is significant. As Gilsenan's reflections on writing and recitation of Islamic texts in Lebanon indicate, this is not an unusual attitude for even a rather more literate

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<sup>1</sup>I was told that Sanderson had translated parts of the Quran into Chiyao, but this had aroused no interest in the Yao Muslims.

<sup>2</sup>For evidence that this remains the case, see Ali (1986: 24ff).

Islamic society: "Writing is still associated with formal, rhetorical and even ceremonial uses. Certain formulae may be used, repeated and repeated in different variations and often in uncertain grammar." (1987: 97). Arabic script is not perceived by the Yao Muslims as being a simple tool of communication. The few who are in a position to use it in this way do so in a manner which is laden with reverence and ritual.

The second point is the central role that the initiation ceremonies played in conversion to Islam. This is important because one of the features of the initiation rituals, collectively known as *unyago*, is the manufacture of a series of pictograms called *inyago* (singular *chinyago*). The production of the pictograms and its central role in the initiation rituals for boys was first described in detail by Stannus and Davey (1913) with additional analysis and numerous diagrams by Stannus (1922). The most comprehensive account of the *inyago* is contained in an unpublished paper by Sanderson.<sup>1</sup> Taken in conjunction with the illustrations of the pictograms that he published in 1955, Sanderson's work gives us a very clear picture of the way that the *inyago* were made and used in the first decades of this century. Kubik's (1984b) photographic record of *inyago* produced near to Blantyre shows that there has been little alteration in the pictograms since they were seen by Stannus and Sanderson. I should point out that I did not myself see any of the *inyago*. I had planned to attend an

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<sup>1</sup>A copy of this typescript, entitled 'Wayao: Initiation ceremonies', is deposited in the Haddon Library in Cambridge.



initiation for boys near Malindi, but by the time that it took place (July) I was already in a state of advanced depression in Blantyre. The following account of the *inyago* draws on all of the sources mentioned, but follows Sanderson most closely.

The pictograms are produced under the direction of a ritual specialist known as an *amichila* (from *mchila*, meaning tail). An *amichila* has to be appointed by a chief for each particular initiation ritual for boys (*lupanda* or *jando*). After officiating at the first part of the initiation, during which the boys are circumcised, the *amichila* is again called by the chief to complete the ceremony and make the *inyago*. The *amichila* and his assistants go to the village of the chief and go from door to door begging for flour. The flour is for the *inyago*, and the quantity of flour obtained determines the number of pictograms that can be made. The *amichila* and his assistants then return to the site of the *lupanda* to construct the *inyago*. The pictograms are made on a patch of cleared ground, and are roughly modelled with earth before being smoothed off with mud. The actual work of digging and modelling is done by the assistants under the direction of the *amichila*. The next morning they are drawn in with flour by the *amichila* himself. He holds the flour in his fist and allows it to dribble out as he moves his wrist, smoothing the trickle of flour into broad lines with the edge of his hand. The total number of *inyago* at any given initiation is usually about ten, but three are always included. These are *Ching'unda-*



*ng'unda*, *Namungumi* (the whale) and *Mwesi* (the moon). *Ching'unda-ng'unda* is a conical mound inscribed as in the figure below, and represents the hill Yao from which the tribe is supposed to have emerged.<sup>1</sup>

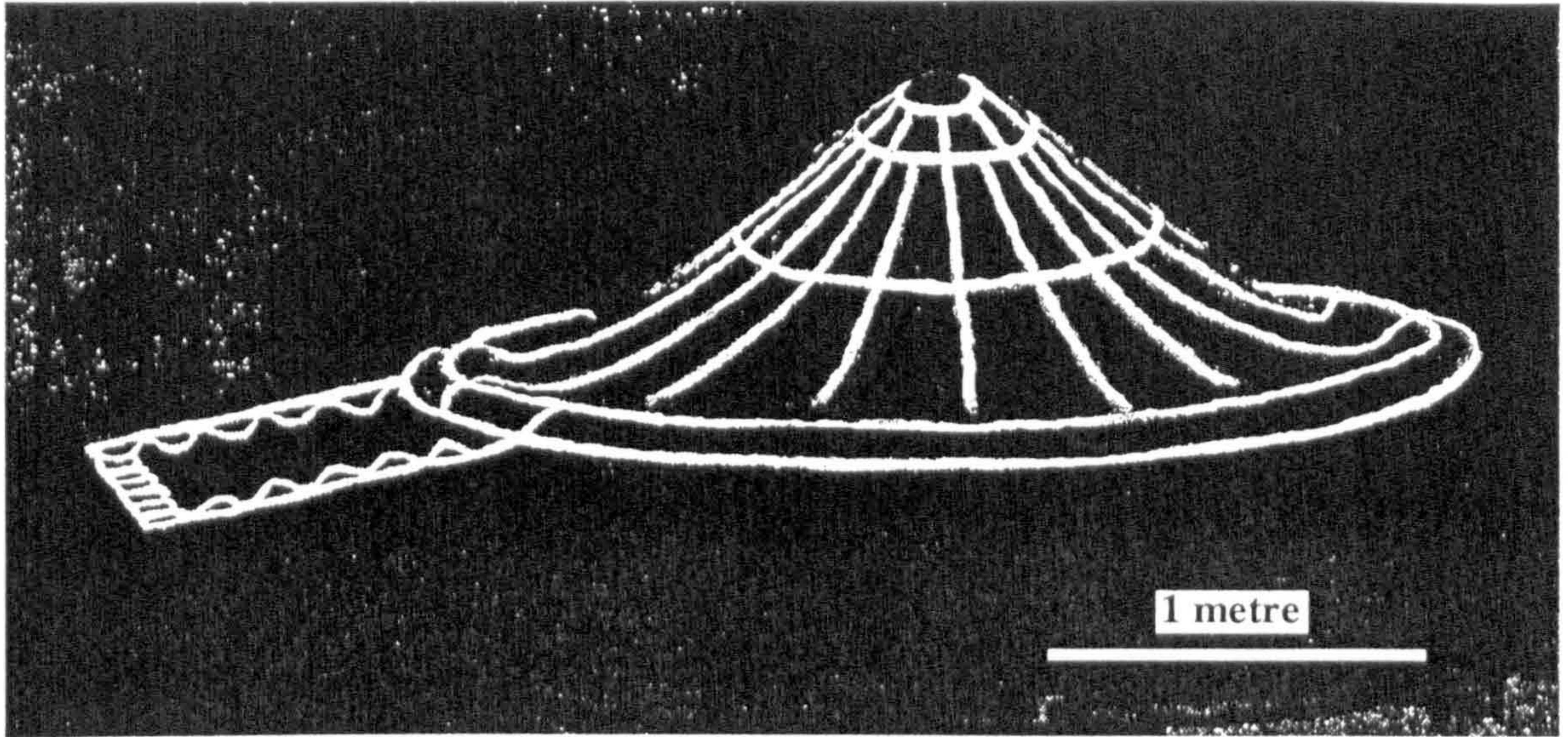


Diagram 3: CHING'UNDA-NG'UNDA

Other *inyago* that are often produced at initiations are *Ngwena* (the crocodile), *Nyasa* (the lake), *Ngwuo* (cloth), *Mbunda* (the zebra), *Sato* (the python) and *Likoloto* (the scorpion). The *inyago* are exhibited to the newly circumcised boys. They walk around *Namungumi* several times while the *amichila* asks riddles, and the same happens at *Ching'unda-ng'unda*, but the other *inyago* are merely mentioned in song as the initiates are led by.

These pictograms may only be seen by people who have been initiated, they are produced within a complex of esoteric knowledge and ritual and they are part of a system of religious and political authority. In these aspects there

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Sanderson (1955).



are striking similarities with practices and attitudes towards writing that grew up within Islam. For a long time the only people who were able to write and use Arabic script in Malawi were sheikhs who had most likely trained in Zanzibar or further afield - in other words, people who had a rare and high degree of religious expertise. Writing in Arabic script was a skill that was restricted to people who were part of the small and exclusive group of religious specialists. Even when it was used for more mundane purposes, as in messages between the chiefs, it remained the preserve of the sheikhs and was not easily available to ordinary Muslims. The Quran was not something to be handled without appropriate reverence and the use of its associated system of writing was also hedged about with ritual and restrictions.

There has been a general resistance on the part of the Yao Muslims to becoming literate in English, and indeed to every other aspect of mission schooling. This was partly a result of their (correct) perception that education in mission schools was also an attempt to convert them to Christianity, but also of an entrenched idea of the link between writing and religion. This has led to an extremely low level of literacy - in English or Arabic - among Yao Muslims that is reflected in population statistics showing educational levels (see Table 5 in the next chapter). Now that the Malawi government has removed schools from the control of the church there is a gradual move towards a greater interest in schooling, but there is a residue of

suspicion for government schools, especially in the rural areas.

The system of *madrasas* which grew up in the early part of this century has provided an alternative system of education for the Yao Muslims, but it is not one which usually inculcated any widespread advance of literacy. The *madrasas* tend to be informal, often located on the veranda of a mosque, and depend upon the incentive of a local *mwali*mu. It is rare for there to be anything more by way of tuition than the rudiments of Islamic practice, and extremely unusual for children to be taught to even inscribe texts in Arabic. However, what they do learn is the association between script and religion, and the idea that writing is an esoteric and restricted activity. This situation is starting to change, with the arrival in Malawi of teachers trained in North Africa or the Middle East who have a different didactic approach to Arabic literacy, but there are still very few Yao Muslims who can actually write and translate Arabic.

The important aspects of writing among the Yao Muslims can be summarised as follows. There is the influence of a system of script (the *inyago* pictograms) which pre-dates contact with Islam (and Arabic script) and European colonialists (and mission schools). Writing has been central to the Yao and to their definition of themselves - a man is only a 'proper' Yao after undergoing initiation and seeing the pictograms, and Islam with its associated



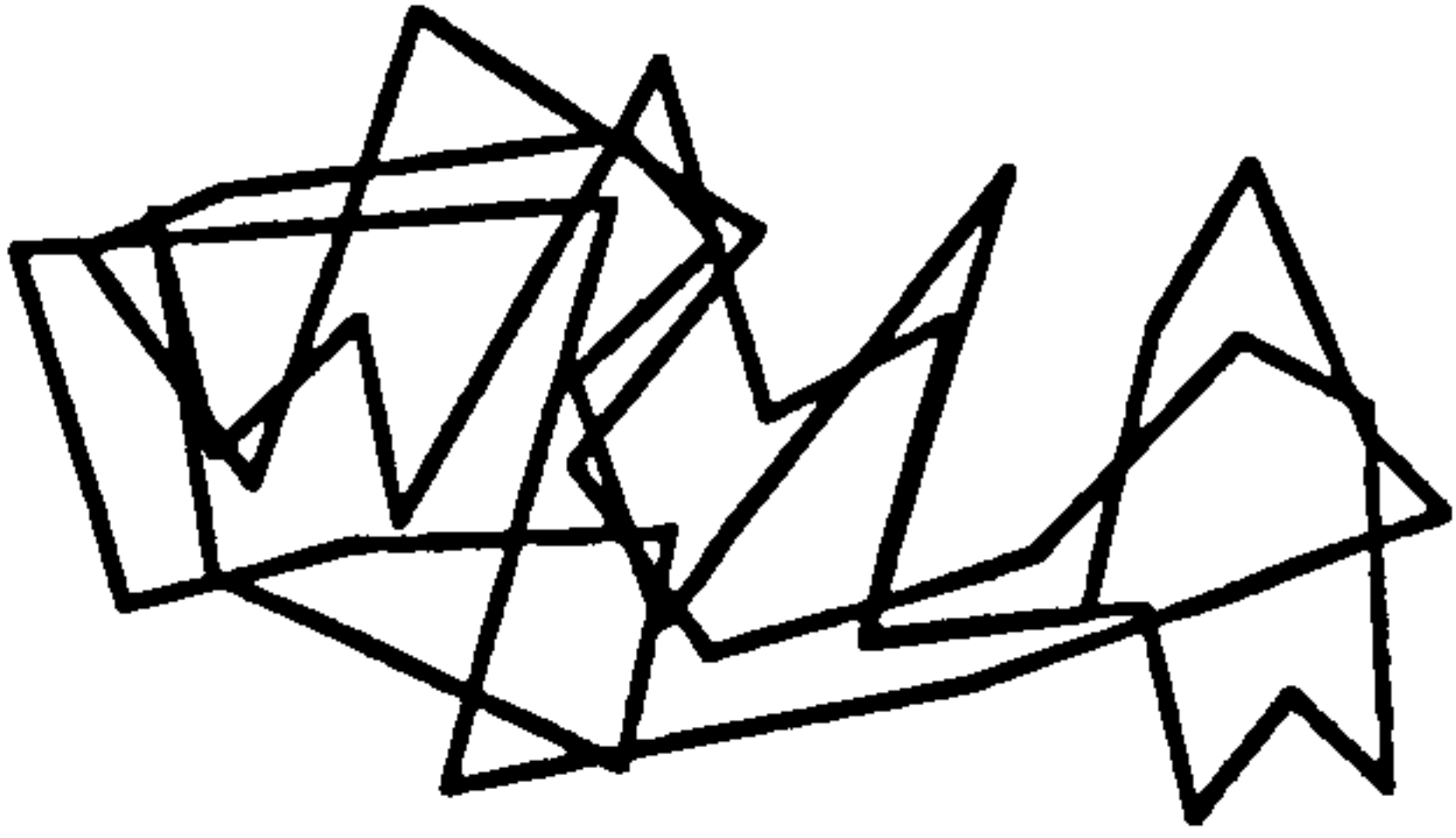
Scriptures has become a distinguishing feature or cultural marker of the Yao. What one might describe as the Yao invention of themselves has a great deal to do with writing, and yet in Malawi the Yao Muslims are now regarded as lacking in education, and the areas that they inhabit are supposed to have one of the lowest rates of literacy in the world. In the conventional sense of literacy this assessment is probably true, and it certainly is not the purpose of this chapter to suggest that the Yao Muslims don't need schools in which their children may gain competence in writing that is less tied to a religious purpose, but it should not be assumed that because there is minimal literacy there is also an absence of the influence of writing.

As one might expect, some of the most striking examples of the persistence of writing as ritual are to be found in the practice of healers (known in the region as *sing'anga*) and ritual specialists. I will very briefly outline the practice of two of these ritual specialists, both Yao Muslims living in Mpilipili: Sheikh Said Mamadi trained under his father who was a well-known sheikh in the region and trained many other sheikhs and *waalimu* (teachers). He uses the Islamic scriptures to heal or to ward off evil and bring good fortune. People often come to him possessed by *majinni* (evil spirits), and he uses different Scriptures for different kinds of spirit possession. After reading the Scripture aloud he writes it on a piece of paper and puts it in a bottle of water which the patient is then supposed

to drink (like an infusion of tea). He sometimes writes out texts and encloses them in a bag to be worn around the neck as an amulet or to be hung in the house. He also uses herbs in his practice, but claims that he only uses those that are mentioned in the Scriptures. Sheikh Said teaches at the local Quran school and often leads the prayers in the main mosque in Mpilipili, and he is certainly regarded as one of the more learned Muslims in the region, but it was not clear to me (and he was reticent on this point) whether he could do more than transcribe and recite texts in Arabic - that is, whether he could translate Arabic.

The other ritual specialist that I want to discuss uses an even more unconventional form of writing as part of his practice: Ali Bwanali's career as a *sing'anga* began with his wife who was visited by wizards some fourteen years ago. He then dreamed of spirits who pursued him and gave him knowledge of healing. He uses herbs and plants to heal, and spirits tell him which to use. He does not use the Islamic Scriptures in his work - the spirit which helps him comes from his ancestors. He is particularly renowned in the region for his *chisango* or divinatory writing. *Chisango* usually refers to the collection of divining bones, but he uses this term to refer to a curious sort of automatic writing. The spirit guides what he writes and helps him to interpret it. He showed me examples of the writing, done with a ball-point pen in a school exercise book, which looked something like this:





In other words, just a scribble, which he then interprets for his clients. Although he is not literate in Arabic, he certainly had some exposure to it as a child in Quran school, as well as to the *inyago* at his initiation. According to him - and as far as I was able to ascertain - he was the only *sing'anga* in the area who used this kind of written *chisango*. It was very evident that Ali Bwanali was successful in his practice - he had one of the largest houses in Mpilipili and had just married a second wife which few people can now afford to do.

It is clear that both of these ritual specialists use writing in such a way that its meaning or interpretation is context-specific, and depends upon the esoteric knowledge of the practitioner. In the case of Ali Bwanali, his idiosyncratic writing is open only to interpretation by himself, but that he can gain access to its 'meaning' is obviously accepted by his patients. In a sense he is like Daniel interpreting the writing on the wall - he is the only one there who can both read and interpret the script. Sheikh Said on the other hand does have some competence in a conventionalised script (Arabic), but most of his patients do not and they also have to accept his interpretation of the Scriptures which they drink. Writing of a similar practice elsewhere in Africa, Ladislav Holy claims that this is a way for illiterate villagers to

'internalise' the Quran: "Although drinking the words of the Quran is seen as less effective than memorising them, it is more effective than carrying them on the body in the form of amulets, which may be lost or stolen and thus removed from the person they should be protecting." (Holy, 1991: 33-34). This may be so, but 'internalising' the written word by drinking it implies a very different attitude to the meaning of writing from memorising it. It is writing as such - as substance - which is seen to have power, rather than its supposed referent. Gilsenan's observation about the relationship between text and recitation in the Middle East is illuminating in this regard: "We could say that in this perspective a reading of the Quran and the pattern of chanting bear little relation to terms such as sense or content as conventionally seen in the modern European tradition." (1987: 93). It is not that writing does not carry meaning, but rather that it is so laden with meaning that it can not be easily adapted to convey some mundane message.

There are certain difficulties in writing about writing, partly as a result of the fact that unlike linguistics there is no developed science of writing (grammatology) and thus very little in the way of a technical vocabulary, but also because there are so many assumptions about writing which are actually derived from just one sort of writing - a phenomenon that Roy Harris (1986: 29ff) describes as the 'tyranny of the alphabet'. Much of what has been written by linguists and historians about writing is based on



alphabetic scripts and has at its foundation the idea that writing is linked to speech. In this view writing is a sort of secondary system of representation in which the letters of a script represent the sounds of speech which in turn refer to an idea or thing. The most elaborate critique of this approach is that of Derrida (1976: 28ff), who suggests that this 'logocentrism' - or privileging of speech - is misleading, since all systems of signs including language are in some sense secondary systems of representation. However, in Derrida's formulation of grammatology it becomes just a synonym for semiology, since every system of signs then becomes a form of writing, and writing as such is merely a kind of paradigmatic case.

I am inclined to follow Harris and try to think about writing as something other than a secondary system of representation: "Once one sees the fallacy of equating writing with alphabetic writing, the whole question of the extent to which and the sense in which writing is a representation of speech at all becomes more debatable than Aristotle, or modern Aristotelians, would acknowledge." (Harris, 1986: 27). The problem with many approaches to writing is that they tend to concentrate on the effects of alphabetic literacy and writing as a means of communication. To use an analogy, it might sometimes be more useful to focus on writing as production rather than exchange. Gerhard Kubik has been taking this line of approach, and it seems fruitful both in rediscovering African systems of writing which had been dismissed as

decoration and in looking at the appropriation of alphabetic systems. He summarises his findings as follows: "One of the most tenacious stereotypes about Africa is rooted in the notion of so-called non-literate or pre-literate societies. Such notions have been upheld despite abundant evidence to the contrary. Various graphical systems designed to express and transmit ideas or to convey messages were known in Africa south of the Sahara in pre-colonial times, from phonological systems ... to mnemotechnical, ideographic and pictographic systems." (Kubik, 1984: 72). The starting point of this kind of analysis would be to look at what writing is rather than what it does - to consider writing as an extension of drawing and not as an extension of language.

Taking a broad view of the different sorts of writing which have developed in various times and places it is clear that they are connected not by their relationship to language but rather by the way that they are produced. Writing consists of durable inscriptions on some kind of surface, and it makes more sense to see it as an extension of drawing than of speech. As Goody puts it, "Writing, then, has its roots in the graphic arts, in significant design." (1987: 4). Pictographic systems of writing, many of which are still in use today, are obviously much closer to the decorative arts than they are to other systems of representation and in some cases it is not easy to determine whether an inscription should be described as drawing or as writing. To a certain extent these exist on a



continuum and the boundaries between writing and other sorts of design are not at all clearly defined. Indeed, it is possible - and I would suggest that this has frequently been the case - to fail to recognise writing as such and to dismiss it as decoration or primitive art. There is clearly a need to rethink the history of writing in southern Africa and it would be worth beginning with the so-called rock art of the region. After all there are graphics from Namibia which have been dated to around 27 000 years ago. It is useful to balance the modern notion of writing as something that communicates and connects with the older forms of writing as graphic representation.

There was a man at Malindi who was considered by most people to be mad. He was quite elderly and very tall and emaciated, and dressed always in a tattered white robe. He made a striking figure as he wandered about the mission and the surrounding villages. He usually slept on a veranda at the hospital, and people would feed him as an act of charity. It was said that he had not spoken for more than twenty years. He walked tirelessly, and wherever he walked he scratched with a stick in the dust. It was only after some time that I began to realise that these were no mere random scratches but that his activity was some kind of a simulacrum of writing. Every now and then he would stop to scratch out an especially intricate design, and indeed his whole being seemed to be concentrated on producing this dusty script. Walking along a path in his wake, it was possible to imagine that there might be a way to decipher

the script, and to wonder what it could mean. Of course I knew that it was not a script for which some key could be found to gain access to it, yet I remain convinced that the man's activity was some kind of writing. It was through watching the production of his idiosyncratic script that I became aware that the meaning of writing need not have much to do with its content, and that the representation which writing involves is not necessarily one of a sort of transparent signification. In the next chapter however I look at the consequences of a scripturalist doctrine that places writing at the centre of a system in which both its physical presence and its signification are revered but in which it is liberated from the restrictions of esoteric practice.



## 11

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## SCHOOLS OF REFORM

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The success of the contemporary movement of Islamic reformism in Malawi depends to a very large extent on educational strategies. The people who I have described as the new reformists have a particular and explicit concern with matters of education and indeed many of them are directly involved in organisations and activities that are linked to formal educational structures. As part of a Muslim minority in a country where formal education was for a long time controlled by Christian missions, and where the government since independence has been content to retain the educational system they inherited without substantial alteration, Muslims who are interested to turn education to their own advantage face considerable obstacles. However, as this chapter indicates, the new reformists have with great ingenuity developed a very well co-ordinated plan to use the state educational system to implement their goal of a complete reform of the Muslims in Malawi. This then is an

account of what I have termed Phase Three, the final phase, of the transformation of Islam in Malawi.

The opening of the St Michael's Girls Secondary School at the Malindi Anglican Mission in January 1986 illustrated some of the problems that confront Muslims in the field of education. In his speech at the ceremony Dr Banda, then President of Malawi, emphasised his opposition to what he quaintly termed the "unholy marriage" between religion and education in Malawi's colonial past. As reported in the national press the following day, Dr Banda "expressed happiness that more Muslim children are now going to school, following his directive that education should not be married to religion".<sup>1</sup> And the editorial of the newspaper expanded upon these sentiments as follows:

"Moslem pupils from Mangochi were in the pre-independence era forced to relinquish their faith before enrolling at schools run by Christian missionaries. With the dawn of independence, the Life President directed that this 'unholy marriage' between religion and education must be divorced. This was immediately done with the result that pupils in Mangochi and Machinga started enrolling without any prohibition and today can get anywhere their brains take them."

Now, while Dr Banda was certainly correct in his observation that religion was deeply involved in education in the colonial era in Malawi (or Nyasaland, as it then

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<sup>1</sup>This and the following quotes are from the *Malawi News*, January 25-31, 1986.



was), his satisfaction that the unhappy couple have since been separated was premature. Indeed, several aspects of the ceremony at which he expressed these opinions would appear to call them into question. Although the school is located in a predominantly Muslim area, it is situated in the grounds of an Anglican mission and its headmistress and several of the staff were members of the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, only a tiny proportion of the girls enrolled at the school at the time were Muslims - some 15 from a total of 480 - and none of the Muslim villagers in the vicinity of Malindi had a child at the school. There have been significant improvements for Muslims in the field of education since Dr Banda came to power in 1964, but in general schools have retained the character of the educational system of the missions even where they are no longer under direct control of the churches.

There has, of course, been an alternative system of education available to the Yao Muslims which pre-dated the mission schools. Early reports by Livingstone and others who passed through the territory occupied by the Yao indicate that by the 1870's Swahili scribes in the employ of Yao chiefs had begun to set up *madrasas* in some of the larger villages. By the turn of the century there were a dozen *madrasas* at Mponda's, the Yao town at the southern tip of the lake, and in 1911 it was reported that a boarding *madrasa* had opened near Malindi on the east coast

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<sup>1</sup>The Christian (Anglican) organisation into which the Universities' Mission to Central Africa was absorbed.

of the lake (Alpers, 1972b: 186). In the early decades of this century the sheikhs associated with the spread of Sufism were active in the setting up of new *madrasas* and training *waalimu* (Muslim teachers). The level of teaching at the village *madrasas* may have been very rudimentary but it was nevertheless valued and it gave the Muslims a credible rejoinder to the charge of the missionaries that they lacked the civilising virtues of letters.

The establishment of the Christian missions (predominantly of the Church of Scotland and the Anglican UMCA) in southern Nyasaland towards the end of the nineteenth century marked the onset of a rivalry between themselves and the Muslims for Yao converts. After the defeat of the Yao chiefs by the forces of the newly-declared British Protectorate of Nyasaland in the 1890s, the missionaries set about trying to contain the spread of Islam in the territory. One of their most important weapons was to be education. Dr Hetherwick of the Church of Scotland's Blantyre mission, for instance, advocated a sort of cordon of mission schools to check the southward advance of Islam (Bone, 1984: 19-21). However, their main aim was to set up mission schools in Muslim areas and to attract local children to them. In this they were thwarted by the resistance of Muslim villagers, and by the policy of the Protectorate government that mission schools could only be built in villages with the consent of the local chiefs and headmen (Greenstein, 1975: 149-151). The Muslims from the outset perceived the mission schools as a threat to their



faith, and one missionary reported that they regarded preventing their children from attending the mission schools as an indication of Islamic zeal (Bone, 1985: 414).

In the 1920's the colonial government decided to take some control of the educational system, and in 1927 an ordinance was passed which insisted that schools should be open to all, regardless of religious affiliation (Ibid.: 414). This did little to encourage Muslims to send their children to school though, since the Christian missions retained control of the schools and Christian religious education remained an integral part of the syllabus. Throughout the colonial era there were sporadic attempts by Muslims to have provision made for western-style education free from Christian influence. In 1928, for example, representations by Muslim chiefs led to the establishment of three government schools, but these closed within a few years due to lack of pupils (Ibid.: 415). Subsequent attempts also met with little success, due largely to the deeply entrenched suspicion of the Yao Muslims for schools not directly under their own control. They had, after all, the alternative of sending their children to the *madrasas* which continued to flourish in many Muslim villages.

Since independence, the government of Malawi has pursued the intention stated by Dr Banda of detaching schools from the control of the churches and encouraging Muslims to send their children to school. This policy has had a limited degree of success, since even in the Muslim districts many

schools remain associated with churches, and although the Ministry of Education now has control of the curriculum of all schools, religious education with a strong Christian bias has been retained at both primary and secondary levels (Ibid.: 417). More importantly, there are very few Muslims qualified to teach, especially in secondary schools, so most of the teachers appointed by the Ministry to schools in Muslim districts are neither Muslim nor Yao. So despite Dr Banda's rhetoric, and exhortations by officials of the government and the ruling Malawi Congress Party for Muslims to send their children to school, there remains a widespread suspicion of the education system in Muslim areas. Rumours about children being forced to eat pork at some schools continue to circulate and, on a more realistic level, there is a general feeling among parents and children that school is a waste of time and money, since the inadequacy of most of the outlying primary schools and the shortage of places at secondary schools means that very few pupils ever progress to a level where they may gain some real advantage from their schooling. This is compounded by a widely-held belief (that is difficult to verify) that Yao Muslims are discriminated against in selection procedures for secondary and tertiary levels of education.

Statistics on education compiled after the 1987 population census by the Malawi government indicate a very clear pattern of educational deprivation. The further one proceeds toward the predominantly Muslim areas, and the



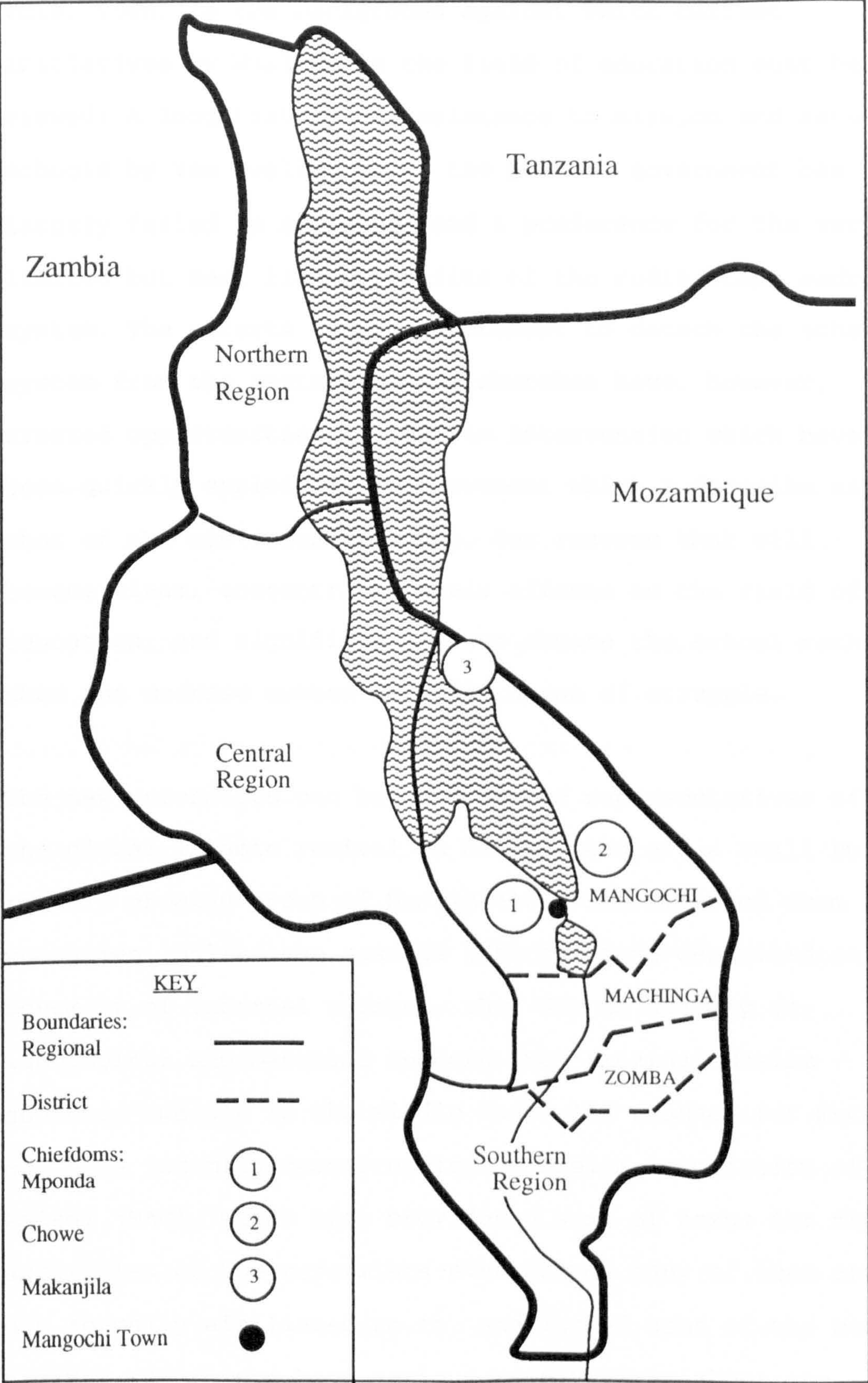
further away from the large urban settlements, the greater the proportion of people with no formal education whatsoever. The percentages displayed in Table 5 reveal that the Southern Region of Malawi, in which most of the Yao Muslims are settled, has at 59% the highest proportion of people with no formal education, although the percentage of its population with secondary or tertiary education is higher than that of the Central Region - due to the location of Blantyre and Zomba, the commercial and legislative centres. Within the Southern Region, the percentage of people with no formal education in any given district rises steeply as one moves north-east from Zomba (55%) through Machinga District (67%) to Mangochi District, which with over 75% of people with no formal education is second only to Nsanje (the tiny district at the very southern-most tip of the country) in all of Malawi with this unenviable statistic. Taking chiefdoms within Mangochi District the same trend is found. Moving north-east from Mponda's, adjacent to Mangochi town at the tip of the lake, through Chowe to Makanjila, the percentage of people in each chiefdom with no formal education rises from 72% in Mponda's to 80% in Chowe and almost 88% in Makanjila. Mangochi town itself has only 46% with no education, partly reflecting the high proportion of non-Yao civil servants located in the District capital.

	None	Primary	Secondary +
Malawi	54,9	41,7	3,4
Regions:			
Northern	33,0	62,2	4,8
Central	55,8	41,1	3,0
Southern	59,1	37,5	3,4
Districts: [Southern Region]			
Zomba	55,0	41,6	3,4
Machinga	66,9	31,4	1,7
Mangochi	75,4	22,9	1,7
Chiefdoms: [Mangochi District]			
Mponda	72,0	25,9	2,1
Chowe	80,2	18,8	1,0
Makanjila	87,7	11,4	0,9
Mangochi town	45,9	46,1	8,0

Table 5: Percentage distribution of population by highest level of education attended for 1987 (persons aged 5 years and older), showing selected districts and chiefdoms (see Map 4).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Tables 1.2 and 2.15 of the *Malawi Population and Housing Census 1987 - Preliminary Report*.





Map 4: Malawi, showing regions and selected districts and chiefdoms in the Southern Region.



This, then, is the background against which current initiatives by Muslims in the field of education must be viewed: A long history of resistance to mission and secular schools by Yao Muslims which the present government has largely failed to overcome, and a preference for the very limited but more likely benefits of the rudimentary *madrasa* system. The efforts by the government to detach the school system from the control of the churches have, however, created opportunities for Muslim intervention which have been quickly exploited. The movement which I describe as that of the new reformists has, for reasons that will become clear, concentrated their efforts on the field of education, and significantly have chosen the school rather than the *madrasa* system as their arena of struggle.

The new reformists can be seen as the representatives of the global Islamic revival in Malawi, and are a small but rapidly growing group of Muslim activists, most of whom are young men. Unlike the *sukutis* (which I have described as a movement of internal reform), they depend heavily on ideological and material support from external Muslim sources - mainly in the Middle East. The channel for much of these incoming resources is the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM), which also provides a sort of nexus for the activities of the reformists even though many of them are not formally affiliated to it, and indeed some of the more radical reformists have serious reservations about its policies. The Muslim Association was founded in 1940 and is based in Blantyre, the commercial centre in southern



Malawi. In the past couple of decades the scale of the MAM's activities has increased enormously, due largely to the input of financial resources from Muslim donors abroad, and a financial director from Kuwait was appointed to the MAM to take control of expenditure.

Apart from the building of new mosques, much of the visible activity of the MAM has been in the field of education. In Mangochi district this has been manifested most impressively by the construction of the Chiwaula Islamic Centre some 10 km outside Mangochi town. It consists of a mosque, a large hall, a rest house and a school. It is intended that the buildings will house a primary and a secondary school, with boarding facilities for both. The classrooms are to be used for the teaching of the regular curriculum for part of the day, and for instruction in Islamic subjects in the afternoon and evenings. This is an ambitious project, and when the buildings are completed it will have to overcome several problems before being able to open. One is to find enough qualified Muslim teachers, who may have to be recruited from outside Malawi (subject to government approval), but also simply to find the time to teach a combined secular and Islamic curriculum. The one set by the Ministry of Education is already very demanding at the secondary level, and if the school is to get government approval it will have to conform to their standards.

In the meantime, the still incomplete Islamic Centre serves as the headquarters of the Mangochi branch of the Muslim Students Association (MSA). This offshoot of the Muslim Association was set up in 1982 in order to implement the aims of the MAM in educational matters. The national co-ordinator of the MSA in 1986, Hassan Nkata, listed its objectives as follows:

to create Islamic brotherhood amongst the Muslim students, to make Muslim students understand the importance of secular education and its relationship with Islam, to encourage Muslim students [to] understand Islam at an early stage (before going into the field of different jobs - this applies to those students who did not have the chance of acquiring Islamic education at a Madressa), to make authorities aware about the needs of the Muslims in the different institutions thereby creating an Islamic atmosphere everywhere.<sup>1</sup>

The stated objectives of the MSA make it clear that their interest is in the secular school system rather than the *madrasas*, and that they are prepared to work within this system in the pursuit of their aims.

The co-ordinator of the activities of the MSA in Mangochi District was the administrative secretary of the Muslim Association, Abdul Kader Lehman. Based at the Chiwaula Islamic Centre, he also had the task of supervising the completion of the buildings there and the construction of the new mosques in the district. Nevertheless, in the couple of years he had been in this position, he had

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<sup>1</sup> 'Muslim Students' Association in Malawi', *Ramadan and Eid Annual*, Limbe, 1986: p127.



extended the influence of the MSA to primary and secondary schools throughout the district. Most schools now have branches and elect committees which participate in activities of the MSA. Visits to schools by speakers from the MAM are arranged, and Abdul Kader organises frequent weekend gatherings and youth camps at the Islamic Centre, as well as leadership courses for representatives from the various school committees. At meetings of the MSA speakers concentrated on the importance of adopting a correct and 'orthodox' version of Islamic belief and practice, and pointed out the evils of Sufi and syncretic practices. One of the slogans which students were given to chanting at meetings was: "No Qadiriya, no Sukutiya: Islamiya!", emphasising the opposition of the reformists to the established orders of Yao Muslims.

I attended several meetings of the Muslim Students Association while I was in Mangochi town and will give an account of some of them. My stint of teaching part-time scholars at the secondary school brought me into contact with members of the MSA a good deal and it was my interaction with them that really gave me an insight into the activities and aspirations of the reformists. The activities of the MSA in the district in 1986 had three focal points. The one was Abdul Kader Lehman at Chiwaula. Another was the chairman that year of the Mangochi branch of the MSA, a final year scholar at the Mangochi Secondary School for boys named Rocard Mustahab. The third was the head of the madrasa attached to the main mosque in Mangochi

town, a Somalian man who had come to Malawi three years before named Sheikh Hussein Jama Muhammed Abdallah. These three individuals, all of whom I would be inclined to describe as charismatic were it not such an over-worked term, were at the centre of the plans and programmes of the MSA and many of the events took place at the three institutions at which they were respectively based. I should add that Rocard was boarding at the school, Sheikh Hussein had an apartment attached to the *madrassa* and Abdul Kader had a house at Chiwaula.

The first formal meeting of the MSA that I attended was held at the Mangochi Secondary School. There were about one hundred and fifty pupils at the meeting, mostly from secondary schools but also a few of the older pupils from local primary schools. About a third of the group were girls, who sat apart from the boys on the left side of the hall facing the platform, and all of whom were wearing scarves to cover their hair and necks. It was the first time that I had seen Malawian Muslim women wearing that sort of attire unless on their way to the mosque. Some of the boys wore skullcaps and most of them were attired in long trousers and shirts rather than shorts. Apart from the way that the participants at the meeting were dressed, the thing that struck me immediately as different from other gatherings of Muslims that I had attended was the way that language was used. All of the formal speeches at the meeting were in English or Chichewa and none at all in Chiyao despite the fact that most of those present were Yao



speakers. Another point of language usage that I noted then, and found to be common among young reformists, was that they used Arabic phrases and formulae as often as they could. Their speech, both formal and informal, was peppered with phrases like "Insha Allah" (if God wills it) and they would always use the more elaborate form of greeting "al Salamu alaikum wal Rahmat Allah wa barakatuhu wa magfiratuhu" (peace be upon you and the mercy of God and his blessing and forgiveness) instead of the simple greeting "al Salamu alaikum" (peace be upon you) that most of the Yao Muslims use.

The meeting began at about ten o'clock in the morning in the main hall at the school. There were introductory speeches by Abdul Kader and Rocard, and a speech by a senior member of the MSA from Blantyre outlining the objectives of the Muslim Students Association. The agenda was then presented by one of the girls from the St Michael's Secondary School, and there was a discussion about the dates and venues of following meetings. One person suggested that meetings should be held in a Christian area in order to raise the profile of Islam among Christians. There was also much discussion about possibilities for fund-raising, and it was agreed that membership cards should be printed and sold to members of the MSA. After a break for lunch I was introduced to the meeting by Rocard, and then there were a couple more talks that had been prepared on more elevated topics such as the concept of mercy in Islam, after which the meeting closed.

A couple of months after this when I had moved to Malindi I was invited to attend the annual general meeting of the Mangochi branch of the MSA, the main purpose of which was to elect a new committee for the branch. I had by this time become acquainted with some of the Muslim girls at St Michael's Secondary School, and I travelled with them in the lorry that was sent from Chiwaula to transport members of the MSA from Malindi and Mangochi to the meeting. The girls, who did not wear their scarves at school where it was discouraged by the teachers, all wrapped themselves in colourful *chitenjes* as soon as we climbed onto the lorry. The meeting was held in the large unfinished hall at the Islamic Centre. Representatives had been collected from the secondary schools in the district, but there were very few from the primary schools. Abdul Kader Lehman, in his capacity as Administrative Secretary and Student Advisor of the Mangochi branch of the Muslim Association of Malawi, conducted the meeting and gave a speech of welcome. Then a young businessman from Mangochi who had studied abroad at an Islamic college gave a lecture (in English) on the history of Islam in Malawi. He outlined the coming of Islam to the region, emphasising that it was brought by the Arabs before the arrival of Christianity. He claimed that in the early years as much as sixty percent of the population in Malawi were Muslim but that this had declined to only twenty percent due to poverty, ignorance and disease. Roman Catholics had also eroded the support of Muslims by building hospitals and schools to propagate Christianity.



He concluded by saying that we can now see visible signs (i.e. the Islamic Centre) that Muslims are no longer poor and ignorant and that the time had come for a *jihad* (holy war) to restore Islam to its premier position in Malawi using money and knowledge as weapons of struggle.

Next Rocard, the outgoing chairman, gave his farewell speech (alternating between English and Chichewa) exhorting the incoming committee to continue the work of the MSA in schools around the district. Then it was time for the election of the new committee. In effect there were eight places to be filled on the committee: chairman, secretary, treasurer, librarian and a deputy for each of those positions. Five candidates were nominated for each of the four senior positions and then everybody voted four times, so that the candidate who got the most votes in each round took the post of chairman, secretary, treasurer or librarian, while the runner up in each case took the post of deputy. The girls from St Michael's had been determined to get a couple of places on the committee, but although they nominated candidates from their own ranks for each position, they failed to win any of the senior places. The positions of chairman, secretary, treasurer and librarian all went to boys and the girls were able only to capture the post of deputy librarian. After the elections a lecture was given by a girl from another secondary school entitled "Social life in Islam" which I thought was quite accomplished, although when I mentioned this later to a

couple of the St Michael's girls they claimed that it had been cribbed from a pamphlet.

It seemed to me that the meeting revealed some interesting contradictions in the position of women among the new reformists. This was a topic that I frequently debated with both the men and the women of this group. The women were enthusiastic participants in the activities of the MSA and several of them would have liked to take more of a leading role in the organisation. However none of them saw a career for themselves as Islamic activists, which several of the men clearly aspired to. The men's attitude towards Muslim women was clearly indicated by the way that the voting went (given that there were more boys than girls at the meeting). They encouraged their participation in the MSA but only as junior partners. Several of the men have attitudes that are even more blatantly condescending towards women, and I heard one deliver a lecture about sin to a group of MSA members in which he claimed that women are "the weak link of the chain" without any sign of awareness that he was denigrating several of the people in the room. At a meeting that was held on another occasion at St Michael's a visiting lecturer spoke on the topic of equality in Islam but the question of the equality of the sexes was entirely absent from the discussion, and despite the fact that the girls were hosting the meeting at their school it was chaired by a visiting male scholar. One of the girls asked why there were no women prophets in Islamic Scriptures, a question that the lecturer brushed aside.



The participants at all of the meetings were youthful. Those that were not scholars or students were young men in their twenties like Abdul Kader and other Muslim activists in the district, many of whom had studied abroad. It was seldom that older sheikhs were involved directly in the activities of the MSA in Mangochi, although the organisation was funded and to some extent controlled by older members of the Muslim Association based in Blantyre and Zomba. The exception to this absence of mature influence in Mangochi itself was the presence of Sheikh Hussein. The members of the MSA had developed a reverence and sometimes a deep affection for this sheikh from Somalia who guided their studies in the evenings at the *madrasa* in Mangochi. This was despite the fact that the sheikh could speak little Chiyao and almost no English, but since he taught in Arabic and it was the earnest ambition of his pupils to learn this language, this was not a real block to communication. Many of the older boys like Rocard who had been studying with him for a couple years appeared to be quite fluent in Arabic. His *madrasa* was a place where the boys and young men that I characterise as new reformists would meet informally to make plans and discuss matters practical and theological. They would practise writing Arabic on the blackboard and help one another with their studies. Some of them saw it as a preparation for going and studying abroad, and indeed after leaving Malawi I got news that Rocard had got a scholarship to go and study at an Islamic college in the Sudan.

Many of the leading activists in the MSA and its associated group of new reformists were people who were in some way marginal to the Yao Muslim community. An interesting conversation took place after one meeting at Chiwaula while we were waiting at Abdul Kader's house for the lorry. Abdul Kader mentioned that his father was an Indian while his mother was an African (she was not a Yao), which sparked off a debate about race. The term 'coloured' is used in Malawi (as it is in South Africa) to describe the children of parents that are considered to be of different racial groups, and several other members of the group claimed that they too were 'coloured'. They all identified themselves in this way because, like Abdul Kader, they were the children of mixed Indian and African parents. It had not been at all apparent to me that this was the case in several of these people, but I was told that African Malawians are quick to recognise these differences and tend to look down on 'coloureds'. The Banda regime had in fact passed legislation restricting Indians from living and working outside the main urban centres, and although the 'coloureds' did not have to deal with that sort of discrimination they clearly did feel conscious of their difference from the Yao Muslims.

It was one of the explicit aims of the MSA and the new reformists to transform the Islamic practice of the Muslims in the district, and although many of them were outsiders in relation to the Yao Muslims and some of them privately



denigrated some of the practices of the local Muslims, they were careful not to seek confrontations with the leaders of the Sufis or the *sukutis*. Their strategy was to work in the schools and to enlist and motivate secondary school pupils who could then go out to all of the many primary schools in the district and propagate the reformist version of Islam. The MSA meetings and youth camps were part of a programme of leadership training for mainly secondary school pupils, and much emphasis was placed on teaching and communication. The ideology that was inculcated at the meetings was a straightforward reformist (some might call it fundamentalist) vision of Islam. An emphasis on scripturalism, a return to the exemplary past of Arabian Islam and on the future spread of Islam across the globe, and a respect for modern scientific methods and technology combined to form a simple and coherent point of view. Slogans that were chanted at the meetings expressed aspects of the reformist vision: "Back to the Quran! Back to the Sharia!" and "No east, no west, Islam is the best" were more popular than the ones that criticised the *tariqas* and the *sukutis*. Many of the ideas came from religious tracts that were circulated in the group. The most popular titles were booklets published in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait (in English) such as *Islam in Focus* by Hammudah Abdalati, *Islamic Way of Life* by Abul Ala Maududi and *The Three Fundamentals of Islam and their Evidences* by Shaykh Mohammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab. Also popular were publications and cassettes of the South African reformist Ahmed Deedat.

Another aspect of the reformist strategy was their willingness to publicly compete for converts with Christians in Malawi and their open suspicion towards Christian operations in areas like Mangochi. Having chosen to work mainly in the sector of formal education rather than in the village *madrasas*, the reformists found themselves coming up against opposition from Christians more often than the followers of the *tariqas*. In some ways this was to their advantage, because it enabled them to claim that they were the true representatives of Islam in Malawi and were most active in defending Muslims against the schemes of the Christians. They made sure of setting up active branches of the MSA in secondary schools where there was only a tiny minority of Muslims, and used every opportunity to proselytise in primary schools that were funded by Christian organisations as in fact many of the schools in the district were. They were highly critical of the Roman Catholics who were suddenly expanding their operations in and around Mangochi town, having just completed a new bishop's mansion on one side of the town and a seminary on the other. It was however the arrival of a Baptist missionary couple from South Africa that caused the greatest stir among the new reformists while I was there.

The Baptists had rented a house near to the chief's village at Chowe and had quickly settled into trying to convert the Yao Muslims in the area. I met the wife by chance when she visited Mangochi and discovered that they had been sent to



Malawi by a church in Johannesburg with the specific intention of setting up a mission to convert the Yao Muslims. She and her husband were attempting to learn Chiyao and she claimed that they already had several potential converts being prepared to be accepted into the church. News of their activities spread quickly among the reformists, who were particularly outraged by the lack of any resistance to the Christians by the sheikhs at Chowe and by the chief himself. I was driven up to Chowe one day by Abdul Kader who wanted to personally investigate the situation and who tried to persuade me to interview the missionaries and find out more about their methods and objectives. I did in fact meet the husband but, not being eager to get into a situation of religious espionage, just spoke to him briefly. The reformists continued to be very agitated about the presence of this new Christian threat and rumours about the success of the mission abounded for a while. It seemed to me though that the reformists were exaggerating the scale of the problem in order to demonstrate the contrast between their own concern and the lassitude of the Muslims at Chowe.

While the MSA is responsible for much of the organisation of the Muslim youth in schools, there are several other Muslims with new reformist tendencies in the district who, while having no formal connection with the Muslim Association, involve themselves in the activities of school-going Muslims. Some are invited by Abdul Kader to participate in MSA meetings, but there are others who

prefer to work completely independently of the MAM. Indeed, there are those of the reformists who are critical of the policies of the Muslim Association, regarding it as not radical enough in its aims, while others have come into conflict with members of the MAM, often about the management and distribution of funds from abroad which many feel should be spread more evenly in the Muslim community. One of these was Ajjasi Abubaker, who I met very soon after arriving in Mangochi town and with whom I spent a lot of time over the next few months.

Abubaker was born at Mponda's and went to primary school near Mangochi before going to stay with his father who was a cook in Lusaka. He attended secondary school in Zambia, but his father died before he completed his final examinations and so he had to leave school and seek work. He came back to Malawi and worked for a couple of years in a store. In 1979 he applied to an Islamic College in Johannesburg and was accepted by them. He was given financial assistance by a South African Muslim. He studied there for three years and returned to Mangochi in 1982. Upon his return he began teaching and preaching at primary schools in and around Mangochi town. He did not get remuneration for this work and was being supported by his wife who worked in a bank in Mangochi as a typist. They had three small children and lived in a small house between Mangochi town and Mponda's. Abubaker supplemented their income by selling fish in Zomba and Blantyre. I went with Abubaker on several occasions on his rounds of the primary



schools. Each of the schools had times that were set aside for religious instruction, and while for the Christian pupils this would be given by one of the teachers (most of whom were Christians - I found only one Muslim teacher at any of the primary schools in Mangochi), the Muslim children in Mangochi had their lesson from Abubaker or members of the MSA.

The primary schools in Malawi have ten levels (class one and two and then standards one to eight) so Abubaker would split them into three age groups and teach them separately. For instance when I went with him to the St Augustine primary school in Mangochi he taught the pupils group up to standard two about personal hygiene and the routine of washing in the prescribed manner before prayers. To the pupils from standard three to five he gave a lecture on the five pillars of Islam - the profession of faith, prayer, charity, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca - and went over the names and form of the five daily prayers. For the scholars from standards six to eight he read a story about the early prophets in English from a book entitled *The Story of Muhammed*. His teaching to the younger children was mainly in Chiyao. His lessons often concentrated on elements of practice such as the correct form of prayer and would frequently involve a practical demonstration of this, but what was quite different in his approach from that of the *waalimu* at village *madrasas* was that he was concerned to impart a theory of Islam rather than just a practical version of it. He would talk about the central ideas of the

religion to the older pupils, and when I was with him he often asked me to discuss the difference between Islam and Christianity with them.

Abubaker co-operated in his work with Abdul Kader and other employees of the MAM and he quite often attended meetings of the MSA but he told me that he was suspicious of the Muslim Association. He claimed that Sheikh Mwarabu, the chairman of the MAM, had misused large amounts of money that had been donated by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. At last a team had been sent from Kuwait to investigate the situation and had installed a director (a sheikh from Kuwait) to manage the finances of the MAM. This had the effect of halting the misappropriation of funds, but according to Abubaker it had not greatly improved the situation since he believed that the sheikh from Kuwait did not have a good grasp of the situation in Malawi and tended to allocate funds on the advice of a small coterie of mainly Indian Muslims in Blantyre. Abubaker had applied to the MAM for financial aid for his teaching in the primary schools and although Sheikh Hussein (the head of the Mangochi *madrasa*) had supported the application he had never received any money and he believed the application had been blocked by one of the Indian advisors in the MAM.

One of Abubaker's friends who took a similar view of the MAM, although he participated more frequently in meetings of the MSA, was a young man named Safari Katanga. Safari was the son of a wealthy 'coloured' grocer in Mangochi. His



father was one of the very few Muslims in Mangochi that had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Safari had himself been sent to study for two years at an Islamic college in Saudi Arabia. Soon after I arrived at Mangochi he decided to open an Islamic book shop in Mangochi. With his father's help he rented a shop around the corner from the main mosque in Mangochi town and opened for business. He appeared to sell much more in the way of stationary than Islamic literature of which he had very little on display (mainly the Quran and some religious tracts in English and Chichewa translations). However, the book shop quickly became a centre and a meeting place for members of the new reformist group who would congregate there before and after the daily prayers to talk and read the newspaper or listen to the radio. Safari would often complain about the Muslim Association and he clearly felt peeved that they had not offered him a job after his return from Saudi Arabia. However, he had a good relationship with Abdul Kader and was often invited to deliver lectures at MSA meetings.

Despite these tensions within the ranks of the new reformists, there is considerable similarity in their aims, strategies and their personal backgrounds. Almost all of them have had more than usual exposure to secular education, and many have been abroad to study at Islamic colleges. Their ideology reflects a strong influence of contemporary currents of Islamic thought (Sunni reformism rather than Shi'ism) in parts of the Muslim world that have recently become accessible to Malawian Muslims. They are

united in their opposition to the *tariqas*, and in their commitment to education as a means of transforming the nature of Islam in Malawi. Most significant, perhaps, is that many of the reformists are young men who are in some way marginal to the Yao Muslim communities. Several leading members of the group are from mixed-race (Indian and African) families and are not Yao-speakers, while others are the children of Yao migrant workers and were educated in schools outside the Muslim areas. They thus have little to lose in challenging the authority of the Yao sheikhs and their supporters.

The MAM however, has been careful to avoid any direct confrontation with the sheikhs and the adherents of the *tariqas*. It is for this reason that their programme of working through schools and education has been so important. It also explains why they have concentrated their efforts on schools rather than *madrasas*, since the system of *madrasas* has always been, and remains, firmly under the control of the sheikhs and their associated *waalimu*. Apart from this possibility of confrontation in attempting to gain access to children at *madrasas*, there are other more positive factors which make intervention in the schools a preferable option. One is that in schools, and particularly in secondary schools where most pupils are boarders, the young Muslims are to some extent detached from the influence of their elders and more likely to be persuaded that the Muslim practices of their parents are in error. Furthermore, of the tiny minority of Muslim Yao that



do reach secondary school, many are likely to be from wealthy families, and thus a good investment for the future in terms of their potential influence. There is also a sense in which schools, with their emphasis on learning and literacy provide a more suitable environment for the scripturalist version of Islam which the reformists seek to propagate. The didactic methods of the new reformists are more similar to those of school teachers than to village *mwalmus*, and their attitude towards knowledge is that it is something to be disseminated and not something that one is initiated into. The reformists derive much of their religious authority from their links with the wider Muslim world, and this is supported by the imported literature which they use to substantiate their interpretation of Islam. They are therefore at an advantage in schools where literacy and the respect for books as a vehicle of knowledge (rather than as an often incomprehensible agent of religious authority) is inculcated.

The strategy of the Muslim reformists, of attempting to enlist the school-going Muslim youth to their cause while avoiding a direct confrontation with the Sufi sheikhs, seems on the whole to be effective. The MSA is much assisted in its mission by the financial resources at its disposal. The Muslim Association has a programme of bursaries for Muslim children attending schools, and it has begun to arrange for Muslim scholars to go abroad for tertiary education in Muslim countries. So the older generation of Yao Muslims have to weigh their suspicion of

the reformists against the possible benefits to their children of being involved with MSA. And since the MAM has been known to give funding to *madrasas* which are struggling, it is unwise for sheikhs to openly oppose the activity of the organisation while it does not appear to directly threaten their position.

Education has been, and remains, an issue of central importance to the Yao Muslims. In the past their resistance to the Christian-dominated educational system, and their preference for the alternative system of *madrasas*, was a means of retaining their Islamic identity. With the present government's policy of diminishing the Christian influence in schools and persuading Muslims to participate in the state education system, however, a new threat to the old order of Yao Muslims has appeared. Islamic reformism, and the MSA in particular, has been quick to seize the opportunity to gain access to the new generation of school-going Muslims. The Yao sheikhs and their following in the *tariqa* have been unable to counter this new challenge from within Islam, and have had to accept an erosion of their authority as the representatives of Islam in Malawi. The vanguard of the new reformist movement consider themselves to be Muslims first and last. Their identity is not tied up with notions of being Yao or Malawian and their allegiance is to the global movement of Islamic reform. The Book is at the heart of their campaign, and it is supported by the proliferation of books, writing and the modern technology of communication. In the world of desktop publishing and



the Internet those who represent scripturalism have an advantage over the guardians of esoteric practice. The new ritual of writing is one of translation and connection not of secrecy and exclusivity. It crosses boundaries and creates a new community of the spirit that accepts no territorial limits.

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## RELIGION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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There is always another story, there is more than meets the eye.

W.H.Auden

The unusually long duration of the writing of this thesis has enabled me to reconsider some of the ideas that I developed soon after returning from fieldwork in the light of subsequent changes in Malawi as well as in my own point of view. Since this work is primarily about change it is interesting to look at the changes that have taken place in the course of writing, and how they have altered the way that I conceptualised change. The most important difference that I can detect is that my thinking now is less deterministic than when I began writing and certainly than when I first outlined the thesis of this work that is summarised in Chapter 5. It is a question of point of view, or a matter of emphasis.



The change in my perspective has been generated partly by the long process of writing itself which, as a serious and protracted engagement with the data that I produced, I might have expected to change and deepen my understanding of the subject. Perhaps more important have been the extraordinary changes that have taken place in Malawi as well as in my own country, South Africa. The curious coincidence of the first ever democratic elections in South Africa being followed within a few weeks by the first democratic election to be held in Malawi since Dr Banda came to power in 1964 serves to emphasise both the links between the two countries as well as the unpredictability of social change in southern Africa. The way that these momentous transformations took place, moving both countries and indeed the entire region from a situation of political stalemate and potentially massive violence to a rebirth of hope and vitality, was something that I was quite unable to anticipate. Even now the events of the couple of years leading up to April 1994 have the feeling of something almost miraculous. It is not so much the result of these transformations that is unexpected, but rather the way that they were achieved.

The election of May 1994 in Malawi has created some very interesting possibilities for the Yao Muslims. There were three main parties competing in the election - the United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Bakili Muluzi, the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) led by Chakufwa Chihana and Dr Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP). In the run up to the

election it appeared that the constituencies of these parties corresponded roughly to the three regions in Malawi, with the MCP keeping its support in the Central Region, AFORD strong in the Northern Region and the UDF popular in the Southern Region. The result of the election seemed to confirm this regionalism, and out of a total of 177 seats in the new parliament the UDF won 84, the MCP have 55 and AFORD got 36. The leader of the UDF, Bakili Muluzi, was elected as the new President of Malawi. Muluzi has been a successful businessman and he comes from a Yao Muslim background.

The victory of the United Democratic Front (another curious resonance with South Africa) which draws most of its support from the south of the country and which was almost certainly supported by the majority of Yao speakers has given them an access to power of a sort that has been denied them ever since the defeat of the chiefs one hundred years ago. That the new President of Malawi is a Yao Muslim is a reflection of their renewed political prominence. However, it must be clear from the whole of the analysis of Islam in Malawi that I have developed in the preceding pages that the Yao Muslims are deeply divided and that the interests of competing factions are unlikely to be catered for with any uniformity. It is almost certain that the change of government will benefit most of them to some extent, but it is likely that reformist elements will be the major beneficiaries. It may be however that parts of that faction that I labelled the new reformists will be



considered too radical by the new government, and what little I know of the new President suggests that he personally will favour a more conservative approach.

The invasion of Kuwait and the war in the Gulf have also had certain repercussions for the Muslims in Malawi. The large financial aid that was coming primarily from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia and was an important motor driving the growth of the reformist movement in Malawi was already beginning to dry up at the time of my fieldwork and was probably completely cut off by the invasion of Kuwait and the war. It seems that there may have been a consequent diminishing of the influence of the people that were linked to the reformist programme. My most recent information, obtained from Malawian Muslims in Durban, is that the financial director of the MAM who was from Kuwait has left Malawi and that the energetic administrative secretary of the MAM in Mangochi is now working in Cape Town.

It seems that one of the consequences of the combination of the transformations of the political landscapes in the Middle East and southern Africa has been that the Muslim community in South Africa has greatly increased in significance for the Yao Muslims. There have been links between the Muslims in the two countries for a long time, but in the past the connection has been a sort of by-product of labour migration to the mines in South Africa. Now, with the growing political power of South African Muslims beginning to match their already large economic

power, they have at least temporarily replaced Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as the focus of external interest to the Muslims in Malawi. This interest is encouraged by organisations such as the Islamic Propagation Centre International (IPCI) based in Durban and headed by the tireless Ahmed Deedat. The IPCI is an extremely wealthy organisation and one of its main goals is to propagate Islam among Africans in the sub-continent. Deedat already had a strong following among young Muslims in Malawi at the time I was there as a result of his popular and polemical cassettes and pamphlets. It seems very likely that the IPCI has stepped up its involvement in Malawi, although it has not been possible for me to get information about the extent of their interest there.<sup>1</sup>

There appears to be a growing number of Muslims from Malawi who have come to Durban in the past few years. Most of those that I have encountered have been young men, and many of them are employed in positions that they owe to their Muslim identity. For instance the caretaker of the mosque attached to the university at which I work in Durban is a Yao Muslim. He is an illegal immigrant but is sufficiently confident about the ability of his employers to protect him that he has brought his family to join him. I recently visited a *madrasa* that is being built inland from Durban and that is entirely staffed by young Yao Muslim men. It is funded by South African Muslims and the idea seems to be to

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<sup>1</sup>One of my (Muslim) friends at the University of Durban-Westville has approached them for information on this and other matters but has discovered that they are rather secretive about their operations.



persuade the parents of nearby villages to send their children to school at the *madrasa*. Clearly the Yao Muslims are perceived as desirable employees by South African Muslims as well as being a means through which they can reach out to Africans in a region that has virtually no local African converts to Islam. For the Muslims from Malawi, on the other hand, South Africa remains a place where they can earn enough to purchase goods that would be completely beyond their reach at home, but it has also to some extent replaced the Middle East as the Islamic centre to which they look for both aid and advice. In the same way that Zanzibar was eclipsed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as the source of Islamic authority for Malawian Muslims in the 1970s so it appears that South Africa may be becoming the new power in this part of the Muslim world.

These shifts and realignments at the global and regional levels have opened up new possibilities for the Muslims in Malawi and created a situation which is much more fluid and unpredictable than that which I outlined in my model of religious transformation. In that model - and at the time when I was in Malawi - there was a strong sense of the inevitability of a certain direction of change. It seemed that the new brand of Islamic reformism would surely replace the diversity of Sufi-inspired practice with a uniformly scripturalist orthodoxy. I claimed that this was a sort of logical development of tendencies internal to Islam, having much to do with the position of the Book and the way that writing is linked to religious practice. To

recapitulate the plot in a brief analogy, I suggested that if one takes up a book and elaborates a game around it, sooner or later one is bound to read it. If one then discovers that the book contains a set of rules for the game that differ from the way that it is being played, there may be an inclination to change the game to suit the book, especially if the book emphasises that the game should be played by the book.

Following this simplistic but - as I thought - ingenious model of change it was possible to account for the rise of reformist movements as a logical reaction to Sufi practices. However, it also seemed that the Sufis and anti-Sufis were fairly evenly balanced with no clear indication that there could be a decisive resolution. To follow my analogy, the older games were more fun to play and there was no way for those who accepted the authority of the book to enforce it on those who did not. The decisive blow came when some of the players discovered that if you played by the book and played well you could be eligible to join the big league and play for much higher stakes. To this inducement was added the evidence that the big league players have a sort of copyright on the book and disapprove of the way that it is being used outside of the league. In this scheme of things, the ascendancy of scripturalism among the Muslims in Malawi depends on their growing integration into the Muslim world in the context of the general ascendancy of scripturalism in contemporary Islam. In a sense these developments do follow an 'internal logic'



of transformation, in that Islam in almost all of its variants has an integrating tendency built into the institution of the pilgrimage. Given that reformist movements are bound to arise around the world (all Muslim communities have the Book) and by definition to be more akin to one another than are the local varieties of Islam to which they are a reaction, the integration of the Muslim world is likely to favour reformism merely by way of creating an evident majority and marginalising the variants.

This at least is the projection of my model, and although I believe that it provides a useful perspective on the nature of change among the Muslims in Malawi and perhaps elsewhere, I am more hesitant now to make claims about the movement of advantage between the competing tendencies in Islam. While the Muslims in Malawi were to a large extent isolated from the rest of the Muslim world it was possible to follow some pattern or unfolding of a logic of religious transformation or at least to make an argument for it. Recent events however have shown how sensitive even the most remote parts of the world are to changes elsewhere. The butterfly effect exists not just in climatology but also in the sphere of human affairs. It is not just a question of world systems and peripheries responding ever more rapidly to the centres, but rather of an ever more intricate web of connections linking margins with margins and generating new kinds of systems and centres. The scale and complexity of the connections make it increasingly

difficult to anticipate the effects of shifts and imbalances in the systems. It may be, as I suggested, that the recent political changes in Malawi and southern Africa will be of benefit to the more moderate reformists, but there is also a possibility that the Gulf war could have brought about a decline of Saudi-sponsored reformism and a consequent resurgence of Sufism. There is a sudden fluidity in the world, or anyway in my perception of it, as though some kind of watershed has been reached or perhaps a point of transition.

This new awareness of the uncertainty of things on a large scale has raised a question that I unconsciously dodged in dealing with conversion - that is, why does it seem that conversion was inevitable? Why do most writers about religion in Africa assume that conversion is inevitable, and why did the missionaries have such a sense of certainty that conversion - though not necessarily to Christianity - had to occur? Their writings from the end of the last century are replete with metaphors of the Yao as a field ready and waiting to be planted with Christianity or Islam: "They are as fallow, ready ploughed and harrowed for the seedings of Islam".<sup>1</sup> For the missionaries it was simply a question of a race between the Cross and the Crescent. There was no question in their minds that conversion might not occur - the only question was, which way would it go when it did occur. Why is it then that African religions seem to have been unable to resist Christianity and Islam

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<sup>1</sup>My thanks to John Iliffe for drawing my attention to this and other useful material in his notes from the National Archives of Malawi.



and have only been able to survive as sort of subversive elements within the new religious practices or alongside them?

One approach to this problem that fits quite well with the general line of argument that I have developed in this thesis is the one that has been outlined by Jack Goody and that I have already touched on in my discussion of the influence of writing on the Yao. He suggests that what gives Islam and Christianity their advantage when they encounter African religions is the fact that writing and a Book is central to them: "You cannot practice Asante religion unless you are an Asante; and what is Asante religion now may be very different from Asante religion one hundred years ago. Literate religions on the other hand, at least alphabetically literate ones, are generally religions of conversion, not simply religions of birth. You can spread them, like jam.... What I am claiming here, in effect, is that only literate religions can be religions of conversion in the strict sense, as distinct from the shift to a new Cargo Cult, medicine shrine or anti-witchcraft movement." (Goody, 1986: 5). Of course, it is not just that Islam and Christianity can be spread but there is a positive and urgent injunction upon their followers to spread them and a very clear motive for spreading them which is absent in religions of birth.

The argument that Goody makes for the power of scriptural religions tends to limit itself to the attractions of

literacy for converts. However, in the case of Yao conversion it is fairly clear that literacy in itself was not in any simple way a motive. There is no reason why the chiefs could not have continued to employ literate Swahili scribes and thus have had continued access to writing without themselves or their followers having to convert. Even now, as I pointed out in Chapter 10, literacy in Arabic is extremely limited among Yao Muslims. It is true that the scriptural character of Islam and Christianity make them detachable from any particular social context and therefore religions of conversion in a way that most African religions were not, but I am not completely persuaded that Goody's is a sufficient explanation of the attractions of scriptural religions and I think one needs to look also at the content of the religion. In particular one could scrutinise the conceptions of time and change that are embodied in these religions and the way that they connect with the incorporation of societies into the capitalist world system. It is not to fall back on the erroneous notion of unchanging and stable social formations in Africa to suggest that the integration of African societies into the expanding world system was followed by a transformed sense of history and of time.

Certainly for the Yao there is little evidence in pre-Islamic belief and practice of a notion of time as linear and directed and change as something progressive and teleological. In contrast the sense of living at the end of time is especially strong in Muslim theology and



increasingly in the thoughts of its adherents. The new reformists in Malawi were very fond of *hadith* (stories about the life of the Prophet) relating to the Last Day and the Judgement, but this concern with the end of time has of course been a consistent thread of Muslim thought. Al-Ghazali devoted the first part of his hugely influential book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* to a refutation of ideas of the eternity of the world, dealing a decisive blow to the Hellenistic tendencies that were being introduced to Islam by Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. He devoted an entire book of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences* to the topic of the remembrance of death and the afterlife. Indeed much of his work is permeated - as is much subsequent Islamic theology - with a sense of the urgency of the end of time and the approach of the Last Day.

The point of view that time has a direction and an end is not of course a uniquely religious one, although it could be argued that corresponding secular views of history have their origins in the Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. Hegel's attempt to reveal the meaning and the end of history has come somehow to haunt these pages, and the reformulation of the Hegelian vision of history by Francis Fukuyama has prompted me to consider the implications of the transformation of the Yao Muslims for a theory of world history. The end of history in the secular Hegelian version proposed by Fukuyama (1992) is not a very attractive prospect. Life in the advanced industrial world does not seem to be a very enviable state in his description of it.

Of course, to a person struggling to survive in rural Malawi even working on the mines in apartheid South Africa seemed a good alternative, but for those young Muslims who have travelled abroad there is a well-developed sense of the disappointments of modernity. They are increasingly directed towards the life beyond this world, and their interest in this world is primarily by way of preparation for the Last Day. It is perhaps mistaken to try and analyse their motives solely in terms of material advantage or power. There is another agenda and another set of priorities that have to do with that which is beyond. The end of time in their conception is not the fulfilment of the desires of this world.

For Hegel history ended at Jena in 1806, and Fukuyama is of the opinion that there is a persuasive case for seeing subsequent events as merely the spread and consolidation of those ideals that were realised then, despite a few reverses. His reading of Hegel is however a materialist one and he neglects the theological aspects of Hegel's philosophy of history and consequently he gives a rather bleak view of the culmination of human self-realisation. It is perhaps unwise to empty Hegel's philosophy of its religious content, as some of the followers of another more famous Hegelian materialist on the other end of the political spectrum to Fukuyama have discovered. As Morris has pointed out, "[Hegel's] whole philosophy might be described as religious or theological." (1987: 10). It was not however theological in the way that would have met with



much approval in conventional Christian theological circles in the nineteenth century. The history of human spirit (Geist) and the realisation of human potential was something that was driven not by a transcendent being but by an immanent one: "For Hegel, therefore, it was misleading to equate the human essence with spirit or some transcendental realm, as both historical religions and Cartesian philosophy implied. Instead, human activity (which was both practical and intellectual) was the medium or agency whereby world spirit came to both know and realise itself in nature, the totality being a cosmic organism...." (Ibid.: 13).

There is a more recent strand of Christian theology that connects with Hegel's notion of the immanence of spirit in human history. This notion that the final purpose of God is already being revealed within the unfolding of human history is often associated with the ideas of the English theologian C.H.Dodd. His conception of 'realised eschatology' suggests that the Kingdom of God was inaugurated - or 'realised' - in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Wolfzorn, 1962: 44). Thus the events since that time have been the unfolding of the Kingdom of God that was established then. According to this doctrine, history ended with Christ - or at least it was the beginning of the end and the Parousia (the apocalypse or revelation of Christ, sometimes called the second coming) will be its culmination. In Dodd's view as in the Hegelian perspective we are already living out the end of time.

History has ended and we are part of its death throes. But in the religious scheme of things the end of history is also the precondition of another, unthinkable sort of 'history'. In the Christian teaching the end of time or the Parousia is of course not an end but a beginning.

Sahlins (1988) has suggested that the history of the modern world system has increasingly been shaped by people in the peripheries, and that the 'cosmologies of capitalism' have been forged in the encounters of European expansion rather than being simply imposed by it. After Babel, the metaphor of the dispersal and fragmentation of culture, the history of the world has been one of hesitant and often reluctant steps towards reintegration. New divisions keep emerging, not the least significant of which are those between the competing fundamentalist versions of the different world religions, but within the diversity of modern life there are certain underlying assumptions that are increasingly shared. Technology, and above all the technology of writing and recording, is connecting people in the most remote parts of the world. A global community is struggling to find itself, linked by ever more sophisticated communications networks and by the growing awareness that the environmental effects of industrialisation have thrown us together in a common destiny, though it is difficult to predict the form such a community might take. The language of anthropology like that of theology can only gesture silently towards the signposts that stand at the beginning and the end of human history. The great tapestry of magic,



religion and science that Frazer unfolded at the end of *The Golden Bough* has rolled itself out a little further but we, like him, are still blinded by the colours and cannot quite make out the pattern. Like T.S.Eliot - who ended his *Four Quartets* by invoking the vision of divine love that was revealed to Dame Julian of Norwich that "all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well" - we are forced to step back and wait for other voices to complete the story and begin the next one:

For last year's words belong to last year's language  
And next year's words await another voice.

It would however be inappropriate to end on such a note of mysticism. It has been my intention throughout this account of the Yao Muslims to demystify the mechanisms of religious change, while at the same time avoiding reductionist explanations. It may then be worth concluding with a quite practical suggestion as to how an understanding of the transformation of the Yao Muslims can help us to deal with the problems of modernity - in other words, to spell out the moral of the story. If the world is really in the process of becoming a community in something more than just a metaphorical sense, then it clearly and urgently needs to develop more effective ways of dealing with conflict and crisis. I have tried to show, especially in my analysis of the conversion of the Yao and the introduction of Sufism, how ritual has acted as a way of bridging rapid social change and maintaining a sense of community. This notion of ritual as a stabilising and cohesive force has of course

been a recurrent theme in the anthropological study of religion but was explored perhaps most creatively by Victor Turner. From his analysis of rituals of redress among the Ndembu he concludes: "If unity, then, must be regarded as the product, and not the premise, of ritual action, it must further be supposed that a ritual sequence arises out of some condition of social disunity, actual or potential." (Turner, 1968: 270). Turner was of the opinion that such ritual action was only really effective in what, following Gluckman, he termed 'repetitive social systems' that are contrasted with the 'changing social systems' of the modern world.

It is quite true that ritual as it is conventionally defined seems to be more characteristic of small communities and tribal structures than of the participants of the modern world system. Yet in order for the new world community to be able to operate as a community it will be necessary for it to find a ritual that cuts across the boundaries of religion, political ideology and racial or sexual difference. The definition of ritual that Turner takes from Hubert and Mauss indicates what is required: "Ritual is a periodic restatement of the terms in which men of a particular culture must interact if there is to be any kind of a coherent social life." (Ibid.: 6). The history of the Yao Muslims gives a clue of how a new ritual of modernity may be developed. The conflicts which arose from the rituals of the Sufis and the emergence of the *sukuti* movement were undercut by the practice of the new



reformists, who did not choose the path of confrontation but rather the strategy of education. Their solution was in the development of a new sense of community among the youth based on the spread of literacy and the conviction that the ability to read and write, and thus to understand and propagate the Word, would transform and bind them to the cause of a Muslim world. Could it be that it is in the multitudinous new forms of writing, in the electronic transformations of the graphic arts, that the integrative 'rituals' of the modern world will emerge? At the very least the spread of writing and literacy can give to each person the responsibility and the power to participate in the determination of our common destiny.

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