

The Persistence of Tribe¹

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Most recent historians as well as the Banda regime have maintained that tribes and tribalism have never been significant factors in the history of Nyasaland and Malawi². Banda's policy was to repudiate tribal differences while at the same time privileging the Chewa by e.g. pouring resources into the central region and making Chewa the national language. As for the historians, it was simply unfashionable in the post-colonial era to acknowledge the significance of tribes except to dismiss them as creations of colonisers and missionaries which had been made redundant by independence. The result of the elections there this year may be taken as some kind of refutation of that view. The country seems to have voted fairly neatly along tribal lines, with the Tumbuka in the north voting for the Alliance for Democracy, the Chewa central region for Dr Banda's Malawi Congress Party and the Yao dominated south for the United Democratic Front and a Yao Muslim president (although the UDF picked up votes from Lomwe as well as quite a few disaffected Chewa in the southern region).

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 some 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

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² I have deliberately used the term 'tribe' here, preferring it to other possible terms like 'ethnic group' or 'people' which, as Leach (1987: 1) pointed out, tend to be euphemistic or clumsy.

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, on 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, I began to consider the possible significance of all this. 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.

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 agents and even anthropologists³. 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.

³ A point of view taken by several of the contributions in the book edited by Leroy Vail (1989). Southall (1970) raised many of the same issues quite some time ago.

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 (1919:7):

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.

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 context⁴. One is drawn to the

⁴ Rangeley (1963:8) in fact refers to the hill as 'Chao', but Sanderson (1954:30), like Abdallah and my own informants, explicitly gives the plural form 'Yao' as the name of the hill.

conclusion that the hill Yao is in fact 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 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, — Mtonya⁵.

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. 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, like Angulu, 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:

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 gun⁶.

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 (1919:8)

⁵ *The Nyasa News*, 6 November 1894:206.

⁶ *The Nyasa News*, 2 November 1893:55f.

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.

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 *Amasaringa* are those who went to live near the hill Lisaringa, 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 (Abdallah 1919:9).

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 that 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)⁷.

Burton (1873:37) 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

⁷ There is a great deal of variation in the terms used by early writers for Yao: Mujao, Wahiao and Ajawa are the most common.

extinct', 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 (1872:347), 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'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 (1961:412):

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

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 (Bocarro 1975:166f). 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 (1963:7-9) 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. 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 Waiiau' (Waller 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 (Waller 1874:61)

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 (Waller 1874:69).

His description of Mataka and the town reveal 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 ... (Waller 1874:72f).

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 (Abdallah 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 1874:78ff).

In general, though, the Yao chiefdoms which were actively participating in the slave trade had turned their attention to the Manganja 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 recent past. 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 Manganja 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 Manganja, 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 Manganja 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 Manganja 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 Manganja. Some of the Yao seem to have been well supplied with weapons as Livingstone (1865:496) found when he met with a party in the village of a Manganja chief: '... and found there a large party of Ajawa—Waiiau, they called themselves—all armed with muskets'. Twenty years later Duff Macdonald (1882:19) 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.)

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 Manganja near to the lake, their villages were visibly different, as Livingstone found:

We passed one village of the latter [Manganja] 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 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 Manganja, 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 Manganja, 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 (1882:77) 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.

This seems also to have been the perception of the Yao themselves, at least in Abdallah's (1919:34) 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.

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 Manganja,

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 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 tribe⁸.

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 *Iwendelwendope*, 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 to reinforce perceptions of

⁸ *The Nyasa News*, 2 November 1893:64.

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 nation⁹.

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 (1989: 168-171) found. 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 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 1874:81).

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

⁹ *The Nyasa News*, 8 May 1895:245.

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 I 1882:131).

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 firmly under the control of chiefs and headmen and they were thus the gatekeepers of Yao identity. There were of course various 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 only 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 century¹⁰. It is clear that, having gathered together a substantial body of followers, the point of entry to becoming a Yao was reasonably flexible, at least where the powerful were concerned. 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.

¹⁰ 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 Makanjila's origins than that of Abdallah, claiming that Makanjila I came from near Monkey Bay and was a Manganja who married a Yao.

In fact, just about anybody could become a Yao as long as they underwent the initiation ritual. This is why the initiation rituals 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 seventeenth century and onwards. More specifically in response to incorporation into what can 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 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 of the Yao to Islam in the late nineteenth century have been explored elsewhere (Thorold 1987 & 1993), 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 that have been outlined here. 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 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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