

CENTRAL AFRICAN BROADCASTING STATION

(Lusaka)

SERIES OF TALKS ON THE BANTU TRIBES

No 4

The Nyasaland Angoni

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In different parts of Africa, there are tribes who call themselves Ngoni. There are many differences between one Ngoni tribe and the next, but they always have one thing in common which marks them off from their neighbours. They all claim a connection with the South of Africa, although we find them living at the present time in places as far away from their homeland in Natal as Tanganyka Territory, Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia. How did they come to be scattered over Africa in this way? To explain this, we have to go back to the beginning of the last century, when the Zulu chief, Tshaka, was establishing the power of the Zulu over the surrounding peoples. Rather than submit to the rule of Tshaka, several groups of Ndandwe people fled to the north. The most famous leader of these northward-trekking groups was Zwangendaba, but there were other groups that went north independently and we must not forget that Mzilikazi, the Ndebele leader, was involved in the same northward movement. After many battles, Zwangendaba reached the Southern end of Lake Tanganyka, where he died. His party split up, and different groups, led by his sons or lieutenants, led their own sections until with the coming of European rule at the end of the last century, they came to rest in the places in which we find them to day.



This migratory period has left its mark on Ngoni life, and we cannot understand them today unless we remember that for about eighty years, they were essentially an army on the move, and not a settled tribe living in one place and growing its own food. As they went, they fought, and the military organization of the tribe was very important in their lives. There were two important principles that were at work, firstly conscription, and secondly assimilation. There was never with the Ngoni any separate class of soldiers, nor any separate class of slaves or captives. When people were captured in war, and it should be remembered that this process was going on continuously, they were assigned to the family of some responsible person, and came to live as though they were his own children. Men were enrolled into the regiment appropriate to their age.

A word about these regiments. Old Ngoni men and women are still very proud of their regiments, and the passing of the regimental system has come to have a symbolic meaning, indicating the difference between these days and the old times that preceded European rule. The old days are known to the Ngoni as "The time of peace." This may seem odd, because in the old days the Ngoni were always fighting, but it is not really odd when we come to think about it. Warfare was regarded as an honourable occupation, indeed it was the most honourable of all occupations. War, for the Ngoni, were in the main successful affairs. We have the records of early Europeans who travelled through the regions occupied by the Ngoni, and their evidence is interesting. They all speak of how they passed through district after district of the surrounding peoples, and how they found the villages cramped, hidden away in the fastnesses of the hills, or surrounded by large stockades. The people they describe as frightened and suspicious of strangers. Then as they approached the Ngoni country, the travellers noticed an absence of villages and people. They were crossing, in fact, a no-man's-land. When at last they reached the Ngoni villages, they found the whole



atmosphere was quite different. Here the villages were big and open, with no stockades or ditches to keep out the enemy. There were many cattle, and the people were afraid of no-one. Those certainly were the days of peace for the Ngoni, if not for their neighbours. Of course, many Ngoni were killed and injured in the raids, and in fact the more casualties that were suffered on a raid, the greater the honour that accrued to those who survived. Each regiment fought as a unit, and if a man showed skill as a warrior he might be promoted from his own regiment into a more senior one. All the men in a regiment were more or less of the same age, as a new regiment was formed every four years or so from all the lads of the right age.

Men who were captured in one raid soon found themselves fighting on the other side in a later raid, this time with their ears slit as the sign that now they had ceased to be Kalanga, or Senga, or Tonga, or Bisa, but had become as much Ngoni as those who previously had captured them. If they fought well, they were promoted either in the army or perhaps in the territorial organization of the tribe, and placed in charge of people who had been captured more recently. The population of the tribe was built up not only by capture in this way, but also by people who came sometimes considerable distances to join the Ngoni of their own free will. These volunteers were accepted in the same way as those people who were taken in war.

In addition to capturing people, the Ngoni also took cattle from those tribes who had them and, from the nearer tribes they also took maize. Women captives were set to work in the gardens of the families with whom they lived.

As a result of the incorporation of people from so many different tribes, with their different customs, languages, and ways of thought, many changes took place in Ngoni society, so that to day \* they are different in many ways from the Zulu and Swazi people from whom the first Angoni came. Some of the changes are



due not so much to the mixture of tribes as to the very nature of the Ngoni organization, which had to be that of an army on the move rather than that of a settled people. The most noticeable change that strikes a visitor at first glance is their language. At the beginning of this century, the language akin to Zulu was still being spoken in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, but nowadays it is not heard very often. For example, the Ngoni of Fort Jameson District speak Nsenga, which they got from the Nsenga people among whom this section of the Ngoni lived in the 1870's. The villages are no longer grouped round a big central cattle byre, but are spread out with the huts arranged in lines. The whole place of cattle in Ngoni life has been altered, and indeed in some Ngoni villages at the present time there are not cattle at all, due to the presence of tsetse fly. Many Ngoni marry without offering cattle as bridewealth, *lbold* as they say in the Union, or *malowolo* as they say in Fort Jameson. In this respect as in a number of others, however, the Ngoni under Paramount Chief Mbelwa in the Northern Province of Nyasaland appear to hold more closely to the customs of the South than do other Ngoni groups. This may be due to a number of different causes, but one thing that is probably important is the way in which European power was imposed over the different Ngoni groups. In Tanganyika territory, Portuguese East Africa, and Northern Rhodesia, but not in the north of Nyasaland, the Ngoni were defeated in battle by European forces. In each case the power of the chiefs was reduced, and the European governments tended to look more kindly on the people who had been subject to Ngoni raids. Some of the people who had been incompletely assimilated into the Ngoni nation reverted to their former tribes, and indeed in Nyasaland to some extent this process is still continuing.

There is a saying "Beer and cattle are the riches



of the Ngoni" and no description of the Ngoni would be complete without some reference to their beer. Some people even say, "Without beer there would be no chieftainship." Beer is served with much formality and solemnity, although as we can expect, the solemnity decreases as the amount of beer consumed increases. The beer must be divided according to definite rules, one pot being given to the headman of the village, one to his first lieutenant, one to the second lieutenant, one to the important women of the village and so on. If the chief is present, special formalities have to be observed. As the party proceeds, people start to dance, singing songs in the old language and reminding each other of the glories of the good old days.

In Northern Rhodesia, the part of the country where the Ngoni live is not rich enough in soil to permit permanent gardens. So every few years, a man must clear a fresh piece of bush and make a new garden in which to plant his maize and sorghum and all the other minor crops, like groundnuts, ground beans, pumpkins, and tobacco, that Ngoni like to grow. After a few years, the yield from the garden declines, and it has to be abandoned. At first people make their gardens fairly close to the village, but as time goes on they find they have to go further and further away to find new land. Then the whole village has to move to a new site where there is a good supply of rested land that has had long enough time to regain its fertility. This of course is a bad thing and it is hoped that soon all tribes, including the Ngoni will learn to cultivate one piece of land so as to make it last for a long time.

Cattle and maize are the two chief sources of food for the Ngoni, but we must not forget hunting. Ngoni like to hunt with spears, heavy sticks, and dogs, and the



the excitement of the chase seems to be as important as the actual killing. From time to time the chiefs organize big hunts calling out the people from many villages. The chief then has special rights to the animals killed, and he is responsible for deciding where the hunt will go.

This style of hunting is a relic from the past. Nowadays it is often hard to find many men to make up a good hunt, as in the villages there are everywhere more women than there are men. Some people go away to work on the nearby tobacco farms, and come home at the week ends. Others go further afield to Southern Rhodesia and to the Copperbelt, and like many other tribes, many Ngoni do not return from these journeys, but stay on as permanent dwellers in the big mining towns. There are also many Ngoni in the Army. Even those who themselves stay away permanently, sometimes send their children home to grow up in the village.

From all this we can see that there have been many changes in Ngoni life since they first left Natal one hundred and thirty years ago. Some of these changes have taken place without people realizing what was happening, other have been made forcibly and are regretted, while other changes have been welcomed. The Angoni are still happiest when they can recall the past, and it in terms of their past achievements that they think of themselves as a proud and aristocratic people.

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Broadcast: English 28. 2. 50.  
Chinyanja: 26. 2. 50.  
Chishona: 29. 3. 50.



**Collection Number: AD1715**

**SOUTH AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF RACE RELATIONS (SAIRR), 1892-1974**

**PUBLISHER:**

*Collection Funder:- Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation*

*Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive*

*Location:- Johannesburg*

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