Willis, Roy. - A State in the Making: Myth, History, and Social Transformation in Pre-colonial Ufipa

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Roy Willis' study deals with Ufipa, an area sandwiched between lakes Rukwa and Tanganyika in southern Tanzania. The Fipa, or 'Wafipa', speak a Bantu language called iciFipa. Linguists have classified this language along with adjoining Bantu tongues which are very similar, but iciFipa itself has a number of dialectal variants, among which iciSukuma is one of the best known. Early European visitors who came to this high treeless plateau included de Lacerda in 1798 and, after him, Gamitto in 1832. Some of Ufipa is at 6,000 feet or higher, and it is divided into two States: Nkansi in the north and Lyangalile in the south, most of whose inhabitants live in villages and use a particular type of cultivation which uses mounds of organic compost as fertilizer. Willis claims that this unusual technique has made possible a 'decisive economic advance', followed by a number of 'organizational developments, leading to a distinctive kind of society'. The history of Ufipa is explained by a number of myths, and very little other historical evidence is available. As yet, little archaeology has been done on the plateau or in adjoining districts.

For these reasons, Willis is forced to examine local myths and folklore in great detail, in the absence of other evidence. This is a real methodological puzzle. Willis, who speaks iciFipa quite well (having worked in this region continuously for about three years with shorter visits later) has chosen to adopt a modified structural approach to the problem, along with trying to obtain an historical reconstruction 'strongly influenced by Marxist theory'. He has also used Lévi-Strauss' theory of myth, as modified by T. Turner, the exchange theory of C. A. Smith, and the Maussian concept of reciprocity. Willis has found a number of similarities in the Ufipa kinship system and that of the Lakalai of New Britain. Further, he employs Kirchhoff's concept of a 'conical clan' organization.

The results of using this bundle of theoretical concepts, plus local information, are of great interest. At the village of Milansi, in the heart of Ufipa, the 'Unnamed One' (the first man, Ntaatakwa), fell out of the sky. Whether the first woman accompanied him or was produced from his knee is uncertain. In any case, Milansi represents a kingdom intermediate in form between a linear segmentary descent organization and a centralized hierarchy. This Ufipan 'proto-State', according to Willis, was perhaps in existence by the 13th century and participating in a barter trade in salt from the Ivuna salt pans south-east of Ufipa. Milansi was also an ironworking centre. In the nearby Rukwa valley, cotton weaving went on, while the two lakes provided an abundance of fish which could be dried for trade. Some of the local iron implements doubtless became standardized commercial objects: a 'trade currency'. Thus by some time, *ca.* 1500-1700 A.D., Milansi was a significant trade, political, and religious centre. Willis calculates this approximate date backwards from the late 19th century, based on the least amount of time required for the degree of organizational complexity in Fipa society, then observed, to come into existence.

At this point, by way of a 'key myth', Willis interprets several versions of a piece of oral history relating the arrival of certain invaders, the Twa. Here, 'ideological history' becomes converted into 'objective history', as Willis works out
the differences between settlers and strangers. Wherever the Twa came from, they are not ‘Watutsi’ as some of the older European accounts of this region would have it. Eventually, the Twa extended their rule over Ufipa, only to be challenged for control by the wandering Nyika, shown clearly in the myth as aliens and ‘negative strangers’. Myth reveals that after the Nyika departed or were beaten off, the Twa split into two mutually hostile States: Nkansi and Lyangalile, who made war on each other. This turbulent era was brought to a close by the Ngoni invasions of the 1840s, coming from the south, with a new period of massacres, devastation, raiding and famine in Ufipa, triggered by the rise of the Zulu to power in the episode variously called the mfecane or difaqane.

By the 1870s and 1880s, the region had returned to normal, as is shown by the reports of Joseph Thomson, Hore, and Reichard. Ufipa was an island of peace and prosperity in a sea of confusion and turbulence.

Part II of this book is an attempt to write a description of Fipa society about 1880. Willis passes from a detailed description of the compost-heap agricultural techniques to a discussion of the Fipa village community—very much threatened under German control, beginning in 1897; much less so under British administration from 1919-20 onwards, and so to the kinship system. Here Willis can show that from a system of patrilineages and patricians (and some matrilineal elements also), Fipa changed permanently to a cognatic system in the late 19th century. He states here (p. 141) that the present population is descended from immigrants speaking languages ‘akin to Bemba’, probably from north-western Zambia and south-eastern Shaba province in Zaire. Trade links and economic forces, along with the Ngoni catastrophe, helped, he thinks, to create such a radical social re-orientation.

Chapter 19 has a great deal on ironworking, weaving, pottery-making and woodworking. No doubt the deforestation of the Ufipa plateau was aided by the great amount of wood required to make charcoal for kilns? At any rate, astonishing quantities of iron produced for hoes, knives, chisels, pincers, wire, fish-hooks, spear and arrowpoints, ornaments, and iron bells have been calculated by Willis; evidently the Yao were not the only master ironsmiths in this region of Africa. And ironsmiths in Ufipa, unlike some of their counterparts elsewhere, were at times greatly honored. Persons accused of homicide could find sanctuary at a forge until their cases were dealt with by the judicial authorities. In the case of weavers, their looms made a coarse white cotton cloth, with a horizontal fixed heddle. Willis speculates that this weaving technique was diffused inland from the east coast between the 10th and 14th centuries A.D. As in so many other places, local production of cloth finally ceased from competition of cheap factory-made European cottons about 1900.

The book concludes with some details of German rule in Ufipa, episodes of shameful barbarity and injustice, largely connected (ca. 1907) with the forcible recruitment of Fipa porters for the war on the Maji-Maji insurgents.

In general, this book is clearly written, employs a minimum of anthropological jargon, is helped in a few difficult spots by diagrams or charts, and has sufficient maps to clarify the place-names in the text. The photographs are also useful. Specialists might quarrel with some of the theoretical assumptions, but the author has deployed enormous ingenuity in his interpretation of myths and oral history. Thus, this book will stand as a fairly complete account of Fipa society until challenged by someone with better information or superior techniques of interpretation. There are sufficient notes, a bibliography, an index, and several appendices on king lists, myth texts, kinship terminology, etc.

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