Towards a Better Understanding of Socio-Economic Change in 18th- and 19th-Century Ungonde.

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Résumé
O. J. M. Kalinga —Pour une meilleure compréhension des transformations socio-économiques des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles en Ungonde.

Contrairement aux théories reçues antérieurement, le développement d'un État centralisé chez les Ngonde (dans l'actuel Malawi) ne paraît pas lié à l'existence d'un commerce à longue distance : l'économie, à l'arrivée des fondateurs de la dynastie des kyungu, était fondée sur l'agriculture et la pêche, auxquelles s'ajouta ultérieurement l'élevage. Ce dernier facteur paraît avoir joué un rôle important au XVIIIe siècle, en raison du besoin d'espace qu'il impliquait : la nécessaire extension territoriale provoqua une modification du pouvoir des kyungu, en même temps que des rapports sociaux entre propriétaires de bétail et clients. Après un stade initial de renforcement du pouvoir central, au XVIIIe siècle, les nouvelles conditions économiques produisent l'effet inverse au XIXe siècle, les princes « éleveurs » essayant de s'affranchir de l'autorité absolue des kyungu jusqu'à ce que, après 1880, ces derniers recherchent l'appui des traits swahili.

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During the past few years I have endeavoured to reconstruct the pre-colonial history of the southern Songwe region of Malawi by, among other things, charting and explaining migration and settlement of peoples in the area and by examining the nature of State formation. In the process of doing this I have commented on the once popular theory of trade and politics by demonstrating that, contrary to the accepted view, commerce had little to do with the rise of the Ngonde kingdom and that an explanation for the latter phenomenon should be sought elsewhere (Kalinga 1979a; 1979b). However, no serious effort has been made to explain socio-economic and political change in the area in the manner in which some historians of precolonial Africa have recently done (Cohen 1981; Iliffe 1979: ch. 2-3; Guy 1980; Chanaiwa 1980). This paper is the first attempt to fill a gap in my work and that of other scholars (G. Wilson 1939; M. Wilson 1972) who have worked in this section of the lakes Tanganyika-Malawi corridor and, in this sense, it is an exercise in self-criticism. The paper seeks to explore factors other than the simple connection between trade and politics responsible for changes which took place in Ungonde between the middle of the 18th century and the arrival of Europeans towards the end of the 19th century. However, the developments in the 17th century will be briefly presented to enable the reader to better appreciate the forthcoming discussion.

When the kyungu ('king') and his followers arrived in the Karonga plain in about 1600, they found a number of families which had been living in the area for some time. These first inhabitants of the plain were basic-

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ally agriculturalists, their main staple crops being bananas, sorghum and eleusine (finger millet). Famine was a rare occurrence among the Ngonde who usually produced enough surplus to sell to the Kisi and Kinga, in the less fertile Livingstone mountains on the north-eastern shores of lake Malawi (see Map). The Ngonde also hunted game which, in the early days, was plentiful—especially in the southern part of the country, and on the foot and slopes of the long range of mountains which formed the border with the Sukwa and the Nyiha/Lambya-speaking peoples to the west. The Ngonde further supplemented their diet by fishing in the lake and in the numerous rivers which flow across the Karonga plain from the mountains. Although the Ngonde were later to become famous cattle keepers, it seems clear from oral traditions that cattle did not become a prominent feature of life until the 17th century, probably after the arrival of the kyungu from Unyakyusa.

Each lineage or family lived on the land which its ancestors had originally occupied. In the pre-kyungu days, there was enough land for lineages to expand and, although boundaries were jealously guarded and observed by all the inhabitants of the plain, traditions do not recall major land disputes. Each lineage had a head whose duties included performing rituals at the family shrine, ensuring that members of the family had adequate land on which to grow food, settling internal feuds and protecting them from external threats (Kalinga ftheg.: 62-65).

The manner in which the kyungu rose to command in Ungonde has been discussed elsewhere; suffice it to say here that some of the heads of these families assisted him in acceding to the throne. Partly because of their collaborative role and partly for reasons of expediency, all the pre-kyungu family heads retained most of their powers (Kalinga 1979a: 24-38). However, they were expected to acknowledge the kyungu’s authority by performing certain services to him, the most important of which was the provision of labour. Indeed one of the forms of labour which was demanded of the headman and which was a manifestation of the kyungu’s control of his subjects was tribute. A headman had to send tribute usually in the form of food and manpower to work in the royal gardens (milasa), at the court at Mbande and elsewhere in the country. Even in periods when certain areas had harvested less than normal due to climatological factors such as delayed rains, tribute was demanded from the people. It was in instances of this nature that more than the usual amount of manpower was sent to work for the

1. The foregoing is fully discussed in Kalinga ftheg.: 33-38.
2. The question of the initial introduction of cattle into this region has yet to be resolved. Evidence so far collected seems to suggest that if there was cattle in the Karonga plain in the pre-kyungu period (i.e. before ca. 1600) they may have been wiped out or almost wiped out during the prolonged droughts of the period ca. 1580-1622. For details of the droughts, see Kalinga ftheg.: 28, 90, 100-101; and Webster 1980.
monarch and the court officials. During visits to the villages by court officials, they were to be fed and given additional food supplies some of which was transported to Mbande. All this was the duty of the headmen who looked to their subjects to provide the manpower and food as
tribute (G. Wilson 1939: 41-43). The system briefly described seems feudal in nature. The Ngonde commoner directly served his headman by providing labour and surplus produce; headmen (and from the early 19th century, the princes) were expected to send tribute to the kyungu.

Two factors, physical and ideological, ensured the kyungu of the services of his subjects. Although evidence suggests that force was seldom used to collect tribute and although there was no professional army to go out to the outlying areas to demand tribute and other services, messengers known as balukula could be called upon to remind the headmen of their duty (Ngo. H. T. 1, 2, 3, 24; G. Wilson 1939: 41-43). A more important authority was derived from the ability of the kyungu to enforce ideological coercion. Mbande controlled religion and laws of the Ngonde State and from the 18th century onwards even external trade.

Worship and ritual in Ungonde centred around the kyungu who, by the end of the 18th century, had emerged as divine ruler—becoming a priest-king and sole communicator with his forebears. The traditional snake cults of the indigenous people had gradually lost their prominence to the ancestral cult of the kyungu. A new ritual centre was established not far from the capital and was supervised by one of the makambala ('counsellors' of the kyungu). The annual purification ceremony, ukutaga ikikungu, was held there and prayers were offered to the gods through the medium of deceased kyungu. The kyungu came to be considered divine, his health determining the welfare and prosperity of his subjects. To ensure that his divinity was not contaminated he was restricted to his residence at Mbande, leaving the makambala to take care of the actual administration of the State (Kalinga fthcg.: 104-106; G. Wilson 1939: 30-33; Mackenzie 1925: 69-75).

As long as the makambala on behalf of the kyungu held a tight grip on Ungonde, as long as the tribute from the villages flowed to Mbande and as long as there was enough land for everyone including the rising numbers of people settling in the kingdom, the system would be seen to have been adequate and few changes might be expected. However, new developments, mainly ecological and economic, did not permit the status

3. Contrary to Wilson there is no evidence to show that Sukwa and Lambya rulers ever sent tribute to Mbande. Furthermore Nthalire and Wenya were founded in the late 18th century (see discussion below), and traditions collected by the present author give no indication of a 'military' in the professional and/or standing army sense.

4. I am using the term feudal very loosely.

5. The oral interviews have been arranged according to the areas in which they were collected. Thus, those from Ungonde and Fulirwa will be referred to as Ngonde Historical Texts (Ngo. H. T.) and Fulirwa Historical Texts (Fu. H. T.) respectively; those from Nthalire will be cited as Nth. H. T. Each oral testimony has been given a number. See KALINGA compiler n.d.

6. The Ngonde became linked to long-distance trade in the late 18th and, especially, the middle of the 19th century.
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quo to continue and changes had to be made to accommodate the challenges of the 18th century. These changes included a growth in cattle population, leading to a greater demand for land and more social and economic disparities in Ngonde society.

By the second half of the 18th century, particularly during the reign of Kyungu Kasyombe (ca. 1765-1805), Ngonde contacts with their neighbours increased. Evidence suggests that the monarchy also began to extend its influence mainly by helping certain families to establish new States in the upland region south-west of Ungonde. For example, some time in the 1760s the Kaonga, originally from Undali (which was also Kasyombe's ancestral home), received Ngonde assistance in founding Nthalire. Between the two States relations remained close for a long time. Traditions also suggest that later kyungu were indirectly involved in the establishment of the States of Wenya and Uyombe (Nth. H. T. 2; Kalinga 1979b). Kasyombe may have embarked on this new foreign policy venture to secure external support in his contest against the makam-bala. He had displeased the latter upon his accession to the throne when he had initiated major constitutional changes which were to ultimately affect the councillors' powers vis-à-vis those of the kyungu. Such changes included the abolition of the practice of killing the kyungu's infant sons and Kasyombe's insistence upon greater involvement of the monarch in the administration of the kingdom (Kalinga fthcg.: 113-115; Mwakasungula [n.d.]: 141-143).

There are, however, two other possible interpretations for the interest displayed by the Ngonde in the area to the south-west. First, throughout the 18th century the upland region, the Nkamanga plain further south and the adjacent Luangwa valley attracted the attention of traders from across lake Malawi. By the end of that century, some of these traders had assumed political control of the areas in which they had settled. Among such traders were the chikulamayembe ('king') in Nkamanga and the Chawinga in Hewe. All of these traders exported ivory and rhino horns to the east coast. Although there is little evidence to indicate that the Ngonde were at this stage involved in the ivory trade to any significant degree, it is possible that they were watching these trading developments with great anxiety. Indeed, their assistance to the Kaonga of Nthalire and their interest in Uyombe and Wenya may be viewed as an attempt to carve out a commercial sphere of influence by excluding the new intruders (Kalinga 1979b).

A second and more plausible explanation looks upon these developments within the framework of ecological, economic and social changes taking place within Ungonde itself. Because of its favourable geographic location and reliable rainfall, Ungonde attracted numerous immigrants, while few people left the kingdom. Genealogies indicate that there were many migrations of people into the kingdom during the period ca. 1740-
This would suggest an increase in tribute and a decrease in the ratio of land to population. One answer to this problem was expansion, if not of the kingdom’s borders, at least of its sphere of influence. The influx of immigrants into Ungonde in the 18th century posed a problem for the headmen who were charged with the task of ensuring that new people were given enough land on which to settle. For some time there had been insufficient land in the north and centre of the kingdom. The only potential area of major new settlement was in the south, especially that under the mwenelupembe. Already, not long after becoming kyungu, Kasyombe ‘ordered’ the mwenelupembe to give land to a number of immigrants which included the Sichali (Kisyombe) from Misuku (Ngo. H. T. 8, 56). The Lupembe area also happened to be rich in wild game which the Ngonde hunted, and was also a potentially good agricultural area.

Furthermore, oral traditions imply that, by the end of the 18th century, the Ngonde were cultivating less sorghum and eleusine which involved the slash-and-burn method of agriculture. Land shortages no longer permitted this practice. Cassava, which increasingly replaced sorghum and eleusine with a greater production per hectare, did not require as much land and could be grown adjacent to banana plantations near the lakeshore and along the banks of rivers. Evidence also suggests that the population of cattle was increasing in Ungonde, most coming from Unyakyusa in the north. As is well known, cattle require plenty of grazing land which was unavailable in the south—the Lupembe/Miare area—and on the foothills of the mountain ranges to the west. As a consequence the land on which sorghum and eleusine had been grown gradually gave way to settlements and grazing. There was not sufficient land in Ungonde to assign sections of it specifically to pastoralists as occurred in Nkore, Rwanda and many other pastoralist States (Steinhart 1981). The upland region beyond the foothills had plenty of sparsely populated land. It was suited for the growing of grains but not for

7. Although most of the families who settled in Ungonde during this period came from Ukinga, Ukisi and Unyakyusa, few migrated from the uplands.
8. Compared with other areas in the northern lake Malawi area, land had always been a problem in Ungonde, see Kalinga ftheg.: 33-43.
9. It is not clear when cassava was introduced into this area. Research recently carried out (Nkhoma 1978) in the area just south of Ungonde strongly suggests that the crop arrived in parts of what is today northern Malawi in the 18th century. Maize poses an even bigger problem in that it does not seem to have been popular in Ungonde until the 19th century.
10. It seems logical that cattle should come from the Nyakyusa because they were the only other people in the immediate Ngonde neighbourhood who were cattle keepers. The peoples south of Ungonde never kept cattle. Also the climate in many parts of Unyakyusa was similar to that of Ungonde, thus making transfer of cattle easy. Not much is known about the tsetse-fly and other cattle diseases in this wider region at this time to enable us to say with confidence that both Unyakyusa and Ungonde were free of such problems associated with cattle.
By the 18th century, Ungonde was developing a specialized economy characterized by three major forms of production: grain agriculture, cattle ranching, and cassava-banana cultivation.

It can therefore be argued that the unusual interest of the Ngonde in the uplands was an attempt by the kyungu to accommodate the expansion of their population and to diversify their sources of wealth. While the internal system of tribute continued to operate, they hoped that they could collect grain tribute from the periphery as well as iron and salt. For these commodities the Ngonde depended upon the Kinga and the Bena, the latter through the Nyakyusa. The prospects of acquiring surpluses and the management of them together with the long-distance trade—which assumed greater importance from the end of the 18th century—were at the centre of the political struggles that dominated Ungonde throughout the 19th century.

Before discussing developments in the 19th century, let us examine some socio-economic implications of the increase in the cattle population of Ungonde. In the period before the 18th century few people could afford cattle and it appears that only the kyungu, court officials, and village headmen possessed them. Those who could employed herdsmen to look after the animals. They were paid in kind, usually one cow, after working for anything between three and five years, sometimes longer. Most of these people came from Unyakyusa or Ukisi.

Many of the herdsmen did not return home after their period of employment. Instead they either settled in other parts of the kingdom or, more frequently, were given land by their former employers. As bridewealth gradually changed from hoes and goats to cattle, many herdsmen preferred to continue rendering services to their employers on condition that the latter became responsible for the marriage payment. Citizens of Ungonde who could not afford cattle for it worked at the girl’s home for the equivalent of a cow or the agreed upon number of cattle. In cases where a family did not want to part with their only cow, arrangements were made whereby the animal went to the woman’s home until it produced an offspring which was returned.

The implications of all this for social changes are clear. The introduction of cattle alone would begin to create differences in wealth which had not previously existed. The 17th-century aristocracy, the makambala and the headmen joined in the 19th century by the princes, derived their status from their respective places in the political hierarchy.

There are still relatively few cattle in this area today, and the main reason is that cattle do not survive for long. It is cooler than the Karonga plain and the pasture is not suitable either.
and their right to a share of the tribute. The position of the aristocracy was enhanced by the diversification of agricultural activities and increasing population. But the aristocracy was being challenged by a new class of men whose fortune derived from cattle, not from their political positions. In addition, a temporary and permanent labouring class was also developing alongside the increasing well-to-do leisure class. The bulk of the population remained peasants, that is primarily dependent upon their own land and labour and without cattle. However, the ambition of every Ngonde peasant was to acquire at least one cow so that he could secure 'hired' labour. The bridewealth system was the major mechanism for the distribution of cattle throughout the society. Fortunate was the man who had six daughters and two sons. Cattle were introduced or reintroduced in the 17th century. By 1900, as much as roughly 60% of the population had some cattle and therefore might be considered to constitute the upper and middle classes of Ngonde society.

There was another important aspect of cattle in this period of Ngonde history. A system of client-herdsmen developed not very different from the *mafisa* of the Sotho. It was not unusual for the wealthy to give cattle to those who did not have any for usufruct purposes. A headman would give a cow (or as many as he could afford to part with temporarily) to an individual in his area with good pasture. The receiver was to take care of the animals on behalf of their owner. The client-herdsman was expected to report the birth of any calves and to account for any losses in the herd. He consumed the milk although, if practical, he sent some of it to the owner. Depending on how well the herd was growing and on the nature of the agreement, the client could expect to be given some cows in return for the service rendered (Ngo. H. T. 10, 17, 23, 35). By this system many more people came to possess cattle. Both the aristocracy and the new leisure class could build networks of clients, networks which upon occasion could be turned to political advantage.

The rich upper class may have numbered between 2% and 5% of the population. They were capitalists, with cattle as their capital. Natural increase constituted capital gains. The sale of female labour through bridewealth became interest gained. Labour could be hired at a good rate of surplus value. Increasingly intermarriage followed class lines through cattle exchange among the upper class and hoe exchange among the lower.

Indeed cattle also became part of the tribute occasionally demanded

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12. See fn. 2 *supra*.
13. For the Sotho's *mafisa* system, see Thompson 1975: 53-55, 86-87, 192-193; Sanders 1975: 14, 55-56.
14. This is a rough calculation based on working out the number of people who had forty or more cattle, more than two wives, and land which they could give to new settlers.
by Mbande and as a result of this there was a proliferation of royal
cattle kraals from which came the meat and milk for use at the court. It
appears that, by the reign of Kasyombe, royal cattle were making the
king less economically dependent upon the tribute system and the
makambala who controlled it. Through the equivalent of mafisa, the
kyungu was able to bring many of the new capitalist class and their client-
age networks into a system of royal patronage. The royal patronage
became the political base of royal independence which Kasyombe asserted
against the makambala. Presumably each of the makambala had similar,
if smaller, clientage networks. The clientage networks probably em-
braced upper and middle classes, that is the entire cattle-owning popula-
tion. Increasingly in the 19th century, the society was polarized be-
tween the royal and makambala patronages.

As pointed out earlier, Kasyombe was unpopular with the makambala
for a number of reasons. They regarded him as unorthodox because he
insisted on participating in the day-to-day administration of the king-
dom. He refused to be restricted to his residence at Mbande and showed
an unprecedented interest in foreign affairs. As a result of the abolition of
the ritual killing of all except one prince, all his children grew up and began
the proliferation of princes which characterized the 19th century. This
had far-reaching effects on Ngonde society. Later kyungu, especially
Mwangonde (ca. 1805-1840), sought to effectively control the outlying
villages, the majority of which had previously been left to the govern-
nance of the pre-kyungu clans. Most of the princes were ‘assigned’ to
the villages as heads and, as reported to G. Wilson (1939: 19), ‘A Kyungu
would send one of his sons [i.e. a prince] to a certain noble saying, “I
send you this your son to build with you his father”—for the nobles were
called “father” by the sons of the Kyungu—so the noble would give his
affection to the son of the Kyungu and the noble would lose his power.
And yet, even so, in the old days two of them, chief and noble, would
remain on friendly terms.’

It is true that in some ways this arrangement was favourable to the
pre-kyungu clans because, although they had lost some of their
prestige, they now had more direct access to Mbande (ibid.; Ngo. H. T. 37,
15, 12, 14). The fact that the headmen accepted the changes is a clear
indication that the kyungu was no longer considered a foreigner, the divi-
sion between the pre-kyungu families and the new people having been
bridged. The turning of the princes into ‘provincial governors’ inferred
many possible dangers including that of encouraging fissiparous tenden-
cies but, at the same time, it was arguably one of the best means of ensuring
effective political and economic control of the area. The system was a
major weapon which the king employed in a long struggle against the
encroachment of the makambala upon the nation’s administration. The
increase in both human and cattle population and the consequent eco-
onomic benefits of this development must have made the kyungu realize the advantages of close supervision of tribute and trade.

Initially the system seemed to work. Tribute was sent to Mbande, royal gardens were cultivated by the subjects and, generally, communications between the villages and Mbande increased. Furthermore, as long as the Ngonde under Mwangonde continued to consolidate their influence in the south and south-west by using the princes, conflict within the kingdom was minimal. For example, in the mid-1830s Prince Mwambeta, one of Kyungu Mwangonde’s sons, was involved on his father’s behalf in mediating between the chikulamayembe and the mwafufu-lirwe; and just before 1840 three Ngonde princes, Mwambeta, Mwafongo and Mwambelo, led the Ngonde contingent in a joint Ngonde-Kamanga-Hewe attack on the Bemba forces which were threatening the economically important Luangwa valley, Uyombe and Nthalire. Mwakasungula et al. 1970: 73-77; Roberts 1973: 121. Similarly in the early 1840s Ngonde princes expelled the Ngoni who persistently raided their country for cattle (Chibambo 1942: 43; G. Wilson 1939: 28-29; Fu. H. T. 3). But once this external threat lessened and the effects of the wars and of a short drought (ca. 1837-1838) began to be felt in Ungonde, the internal struggles took a different turn.

With the addition to the aristocracy of the princes and their descendants, Ngonde society was by 1850 highly stratified. The power of the monarchy after the death of Kyungu Mwangonde (ca. 1839) had once again been whittled down by the determination of the makambala to revive their ancient powers by electing unassertive weak princes to the throne. This was paralleled by the rising power of the princes which brought them into perpetual conflict with the makambala. It would appear that the new capitalist cattle-owning class with its clientage had become allied with the princes in their power struggle with the makambala, a struggle primarily over control of the tribute system and trade.

Indeed by the 1870s the conflict between them became so acute that it was also no longer unusual for the princes to withhold the sending of tribute to Mbande. Neither food nor manpower to work in the royal gardens were sent to Mbande (Ngo. H. T. 15, 22; G. Wilson 1939: 42-43, 64). The emergence of strong princes also affected Ngonde trade with their neighbours. The centre lost control of trade to the princes. This trade involved iron from Ukinga, pots from Ukisi and hoes from Ndali. Oral traditions clearly indicate that by the mid-19th century trade was carried out without the kyungu and his counsellors having any say in it. It is therefore suggested that the political conflicts—which have been amply discussed in another work (Kalinga fth.: 165-177)—can also be explained in terms of competition for economic supremacy and control over wealth from within Ungonde and from regional trade.

With the extension of regional into long-distance or international trade, the internal struggle for economic and political power heightened.
When the Swahili-Arab traders led by Mlozi arrived in the area in 1880, the puppet Kyungu Mwaualambo and his *makambala* welcomed them and allowed them to settle near Mbande hill (*ibid.* 197-202; Kalinga 1980: 211; Wright & Lary 1971: 563-570). Although the *makambala* also hoped that the traders from the east coast might help them repel possible Ngoni raids and though Ngonde-Swahili commerce was anticipated, the *makambala* also probably viewed them as a potential weapon in a physical or political as well as an economic sense. Swahili guns might be used against an insurrection of the princes and their clientages; Swahili guns could be used to coerce the princes into delivering the tribute to Mbande. The lucrative trade with the Swahili could also bring more wealth to Mbande and make up for some of the tribute withheld by the princes. Swahili newcomers were to find themselves almost instantly in the vortex of Ngonde politics.

The princes were not prepared to be outmatched by the *kyungu* and the *makambala*. A number of them made serious attempts to cultivate good relations with the Swahili by paying visits to the traders’ camps and, according to traditions, two of the princes, Kayuni and Mwambelo, ‘gave’ wives to Mlozi (Kalinga *ftheg.*: ch. 7). When the European employees of the African Lakes Company arrived in Ungonde in the 1880s, the powerful princes quickly signed treaties with the company. Three of the most powerful princes—Mwakasungula, Karonga and Kilupula—ceded large tracts of land to the company even though, customarily and traditionally, only the *kyungu* had the power to do so. Until 1894 when one of the princes, Mwakasungula, became *kyungu*, the British dealt with the princes. They ignored the *kyungu* whom they described as feeble.

In conclusion, it would seem that far from enhancing and uniting the Ngonde, trade almost disintegrated the kingdom and definitely assisted the British in gaining a strong foothold. Although the *kyungu* was in theory sole authority in the kingdom, there was no means of effecting full control of the region under his jurisdiction. There was no standing army and the *balukuta* were no substitute for military force. Even the

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15. These ‘agreements’ will be found in London, Public Records Office/Colonial Office 525/135, internal file 33359; and PRO/CO 529/141.
16. For example, James Stewart (1879: 296-298), who was one of the first Europeans to visit Ungonde, simply referred to the Ngonde as the ‘Chungus’ (presumably meaning the people of the *kyungu*) but did not mention the person or office of the *kyungu*. The *kyungu* was ignored in all the accounts of the Europeans who visited the area in the 1880s. It was the princes who featured prominently.
17. The manner in which trade ultimately facilitated a firm British control of the area is discussed in KALINGA *ftheg.*: 190-233.
once invincible magical powers of the kyungu were no longer feared by everybody. In the early 1890s Kyungu Mwaulambo (1879-1894) left Mbande for his mother’s home twelve miles north of the Ngonde capital ‘because he was being bewitched by his adversaries’ (Ngo. H. T. 15, 32).

By the middle of the 1880s, the princes were more powerful than the kyungu and his councillors—and the result was that Ungonde gradually became in practice a confederate State. Furthermore until the arrival of the Swahili no major trade routes passed through Ungonde. Traders crossed the lake at Chilumba, in Fulirwa country, and even the important regional trade in the area between Ukinga and Undali did not pass through central Ungonde. The Ngonde princes near the border areas profited from the regional and international commerce more than Mbande. If one is to accept the theory of trade and politics, it was the princes such as Kilupula in the north, Kayumi and Mwambelo in the south or even headmen such as the mcenelupembe who benefitted from external contacts in the pre-Swahili period.

Increasing stratification and increasing differences in wealth led to greater avarice among the ruling classes of the Ngonde State. The king vied with the makambala and, later, with the princes in controlling the economic resources of the State, the tribute system, the cattle clientages and commerce. The makambala dominated the 17th and early 18th centuries, the monarchy from ca. 1765 to 1839, and the princes until the arrival of colonialism. Each change in power relations represented a change in economic circumstances. The makambala dominated the tribute system when the primary economic activity was grain (sorghum and eleusine) and banana agriculture. The kyungu rose to power when cattle provided means of capital accumulation. The princes especially those on the frontiers, became de facto kings when they were able to tap and control international trade.

Meanwhile the hold over Nthalire in the uplands did not last beyond the first four decades of the 19th century. The initial expectation of wealth from that region did not materialize partly because the Ngonde failed to develop efficient institutions for the appropriation of wealth from areas external to the kingdom. Partly too on the ideological level, polities such as Nthalire did not have the same reverence for Mbande. They were not coerced by the awesome magical powers ascribed to the kyungu.

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