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Doing Fieldwork on Mafia Island, Tanzania – the first visit 1965-7

Preface (written in Dec. 2012)

A first visit to Tanzania: 1962

In the early 1960s, while I was studying for a degree in African Studies (which included Swahili and anthropology), I spent the summer of 1962 visiting the East African coast. Most of the time was working on Kilwa Kisiwani, assisting with the archaeological excavations being directed by Neville Chittick, but I also went to Dar, Tanga, Zanzibar, Mombasa and Nairobi. It was perhaps this trip, more than anything else, which determined my future career path – I wanted to become an anthropologist. Furthermore, I wanted to go and do fieldwork on Mafia Island, which I had seen as I sailed past it on an Italian ship bound for Mombasa after finishing my stint on Kilwa Kisiwani.

After completing my undergraduate degree in 1963, I embarked on a masters course and wrote a thesis on land tenure on the East African coast. This enabled me to read a lot of the literature on the area, so by the time I set off for fieldwork in September 1965, I was, or so I thought, reasonably prepared.

A book about fieldwork

In the 1980s, after my third field trip to Mafia Island in 1985, I began to write a book about my experiences of doing fieldwork, first as a young postgraduate carrying out my field research from 1965-7, then with a return visit in 1976 to make a film with the BBC, and finally about another visit in 1985 to research the topics of food, health and fertility. I wrote the first drafts of ten chapters, five pertaining to the first and longest period of fieldwork and two on each of the second and third visits. For a variety of reasons, the book was never finished, although I have used much of the material in various other publications and thus saw no reason to include it here.

In this piece, which constituted the first four chapters of the unfinished manuscript, I present an account of my first experience of fieldwork with all its delights and problems. The material is highly personal and draws upon my own diary, and letters to my parents (referred to in the text as M and D) and my partner (referred to as LC), as well as my notebooks (referred to as NB and numbered). I conclude by describing what happens after fieldwork – the painful process of writing up: seminar papers, a Ph.D. thesis¹ and first publications², with conflicting advice from my two supervisors and my own uncertainty about where my focus should lie.

¹ Non-unilineal kinship among Swahili speakers of northern Mafia Island, Tanzania. Ph.D. thesis, University of London 1968.

² 1969 "Cognatic Descent Groups on Mafia Island, Tanzania" *Man* 4, 3: 419-31; 1975 *Choice and Constraint in a Swahili Community: Property, Hierarchy and Cognatic Descent on the East African Coast* Oxford University Press/International African Institute; 1976 "Boys' circumcision and girls' puberty rites among the Swahili of Mafia Island Tanzania" *Africa* 46, 1: 21-33.

In re-reading this material after so many years, I have not attempted to change very much, other than inserting some references and tidying up the formatting. Obviously I would write it very differently today, some thirty years later, and would no doubt want to include the further visits I made to the island in 1976, 1985, 1994, 2002, 2004, and 2010.

Chapter I. Starting out: preliminaries to fieldwork

Margaret Mead once suggested that every detail of reaching the field is part of the total field experience, although most anthropological monographs only begin with the 'real' field, which in the 1960s meant usually the tribe or the village. In this chapter, I describe the process of by which I finally arrived in Kanga village on Mafia Island, Tanganyika, some two months after leaving London. At the time, I saw most of this period as so much frustration and time wasted. In retrospect, I realise that that Mead was right, and that furthermore, during this time, I was working out not only practical problems - permission, health, housing, transport - but also how to position myself in relation to the people I had come to study.

My major sources for this chapter are letters which I wrote to my parents and to my partner who was at that time just writing up his own Ph.D. after field-work in Nepal. There are over 300 in all, covering a period of 18 months. The difference between the two sets of letters is striking - those to my parents tend to spell things out in a way that was not necessary when I wrote to a fellow anthropologist. Furthermore, the former are usually bright and cheerful, whereas since I knew that my partner had gone through a similar experience in his own field-work, I was able to use the latter as a listening ear, and pour out complaints and problems.

Getting to Mafia

I arrived in Dar es Salaam on September 26th, 1965. Because I had been there before in 1962, I already had plenty of contacts, and was able to borrow a flat and hire a car from the university without too much trouble. I began to make preparations for the field, buying household goods which included one great luxury - a small second-hand kerosene fridge.

More importantly, I also had to deal with the bureaucracy. In a letter to my parents, I record that in spite of the help of Wilfred Whiteley (then visiting professor in the University of Dar es Salaam and my acting supervisor while I was in East Africa), it took ten rather wearing days to complete all the necessary formalities at government offices and at the university. I got impatient that I was not able to go straight into the 'real' field, and felt that I was wasting time. Although I was aware that I could be doing more reading in anthropology or studying Swahili, I recorded in one letter that after a day spent waiting around government offices - I had to go to four different ministries - "Jane Austen is about all that I can take at the moment." Such feelings were, of course, to recur numerous times in the course of field-work itself. By modern standards, when would-be ethnographers often wait more than a year to get permission to go to the field, my experience was amazingly straightforward, but it did not feel so at the time.

By the 7th October, I was able to get a last-minute seat on the plane going to Mafia due to a cancellation. Only in a later letter did I admit to LC that I had

actually felt tearful during the flight, whether from tiredness, relief, apprehension or fear, or a mixture of all of these, I was never sure. But in my first letters home to my parents, I was determinedly cheerful:

Arrived safely (on Mafia) on Thursday, and half the island seemed to know I was coming. This was because my luggage had arrived before me. I was invited to stay by a young European couple who manage a large coconut estate here. They have a very pleasant house, and a separate little guest house where I stay.

I was thrilled to be on the island at last and delighted in its beauty - the palm trees, little hills and rice valleys which characterize the south of the island. However, a problem which was to recur constantly is noted in an early letter: "I'm already so horribly bitten by just about every type of the numerous insects here that I don't think I could stand any more."

The coconut plantation was two miles south of the District capital, Kilindoni, which I described in a letter to LC:

Kilindoni has government offices, a dispensary, shops etc, but it is on a very small scale, and I suppose you might compare it to your Ilam Bazaar (where LC had done field-work in Nepal). It is the only place with these amenities, and I was conducted round it yesterday by the District Secretary. The chief man here, the Area Commissioner, is away in Dar, and I hope that he will be returning on Sunday... The other government officers... are all quite nice, but insist on everything being done on an official level. Thus I can't move out into a village until the AC comes back, and then he will have to contact the Village Executive Officer.

While I waited for further formalities to be completed, I was able to consult District records, among them the 'District Book', a miscellaneous collection of articles, statistics and information on a wide variety of matters including local customs, weather, agricultural reports, geology and many other topics. These Districts books were kept by each District Officer (later called Area Commissioner) and are a mine of information³.

My first impressions of the island are given in a letter written to LC on October 9th:

As far as I can tell, the island can be roughly divided (into two). In the north the people are more (not completely) homogenous and they grow annual crops, while in the south, people either work on the large estates owned by Europeans and Indians, or have their own coconut trees. There are large numbers of immigrants from the mainland working on the estates, so this could also provide a line of research.

I soon realised that the local settlement pattern was not at all as I had been led

³ These District Books were later moved to the National Archives

to believe it would be on the coast. Widjeyewardene's thesis⁴, which I had read in Cambridge when I was writing my M.A. thesis, made much of the fact that nucleated settlements are a distinguishing feature of coastal society, but there did not seem to be any of these in the parts of Mafia that I had seen. However, I was told that in the north of the island, such settlements did exist.

When I had been on Mafia for a short time, I realised that there were considerable disadvantages to living out on the plantation. Although it was extremely comfortable, I felt that I was far from real 'field-work'. I searched for a room in the District capital Kilindoni, renting one for 25/- per month from a Goan couple who ran a shop, and stayed there for several weeks. Here I was finally able to unpack some of my luggage, and tackle the mysteries of Tilley lamp, safari bed with mosquito net and sundry other items I had been advised to bring. There were two major problems with living in Kilindoni:

After going off to sleep last night, was awakened by the sound of some large creature coming through the roof. When I eventually put on my torch I saw nothing. Only on lighting the Tilley did I see a huge female cockroach. I presume it was a female since it had been flying around and making a lot of noise. Now my feelings about cockroaches are of the most irrational kind, but I did manage to kill it, although I think there is another one in hiding somewhere

I was in fact petrified. In a later letter to LC, I compared my feelings about cockroaches to those of the hero of Orwell's 1984 for rats. In the morning, I told my hosts, and they sent someone to stuff up the holes in the ceiling, and spray the room. But I only really felt safe when I finally attached my mosquito net to my camp bed, and thereafter felt that I had a secure corner to which I could retire.

The other problem was transport. I was convinced that I needed a vehicle to get around and explore the island properly and independently. A bicycle seemed out of the question, as women never rode them, no women's bikes were available, and cycling along the very sandy tracks which passed for roads in the south was extremely exhausting, as I discovered on the only occasion that I tried it. I was told of an unused Land Rover which belonged to a now moribund fishing company and I made strenuous efforts to hire it. It took some time to make contact with the fishing company, but they finally agreed that I could hire it for the exorbitant sum of 10/- per day. However, it needed a good deal of repair, so I settled down to wait in Kilindoni for a further period.

Living in Kilindoni

I spent five weeks living in Kilindoni while I organised my permission from local officials, obtained a vehicle, got it repaired, searched for a suitable site for field-work, and interviewed possible cooks and assistants. In the meanwhile, I also worked on government and court records, attended as many local events as possible, and travelled round the island.

⁴ Wijeyewardene, G. 1961. *Some aspects of village solidarity among Kiswahili-speaking communities of Kenya and Tanganyika*. D. Phil. Thesis, University of Cambridge.

One of the first events was a dance organised by the UWT (*Umoja wa Wanawake wa Tanzania* - the Tanzanian Women's Society) which was an occasion for me to try out my new tape recorder - a heavy reel-to-reel Telefunken.

It was interesting to note that people liked the recording, and after they had heard a little (played back) took absolutely no notice of it. In fact, one of the locals also has a tape recorder, so they are well used to it.

One of the dances I recorded was the women's *kalewa*, the songs for which are extempore and full of double-entendre. One of those I recorded on that first occasion concerned 'my' Land Rover:

*The fish vehicle makes us worried, It finishes people off
Gari la samaki inatutia wasiwasi, Inamaliza umate (= watu)*

I was told that this song referred to the previous driver of the Land Rover who was known to use his vehicle for amorous exploits. As it turned out, the literal meaning of the song was all too prophetic as far as I was concerned. The vehicle gave me many worries, and nearly did finish off not only my patience, but also my grant.

Another interesting event was a debate organised by TANU (the Tanzanian African National Union - the then governing party) on the motion that "It is better for women to do the same work as men". I was told that the purpose of the debate was to convince people that women should not be kept at home because the Area Commissioner had commented that men objected to the women going to party meetings. Paradoxically, the only women present at this debate were the Chairwoman of the UWT and myself. A second paradox, which I only realised some time later, was that only a minority of women on Mafia from the wealthiest families in the south of the island were in any way secluded. All other women worked in the fields, as well as carrying out domestic work, and reluctance to attend meetings was almost certainly as much due to lack of time as anything else. Women *were* already doing the same work as men, if not more, and it might have made better sense to word the motion the other way round. In the form in which it was put, it reflected more the gender ideology of the mainland, mostly Christian government officials, than the reality of life for most people on Mafia.

Gradually I began to get to know a number of people in and around Kilindoni. Some were very helpful in giving me information but demands began to be made upon me in return:

The Chairman of a village I've been visiting near here has had fever... and I've taken him into hospital for his injections. Not having a vehicle currently (it had broken down again) I couldn't continue to do this for the last two days. Last night at 2 a.m. one of his relatives came and said he was very ill indeed and that they could not get any of the vehicle owners in Kilindoni to turn out (to take him to

hospital). So I had to go and wake one of them up myself and say that I would pay him, and then we drove off to the village which is about one and a half miles away. He was really in pretty bad shape, but we got him in here, and this evening he is a lot better.

This event prompted some reflections on illness and my feelings about it, as well as my attempts to understand how people saw such crises:

One of his wives came with us to the hospital, and she was giggling most of the way.... Yet I remember when we came back from Kanga (another village I had visited) we brought a woman who was also very sick, and her husband came and looked after her so carefully...

This passage says a good deal about the anthropologist. I felt it was my duty to try and help this man, partly because of the kind of Christian morality on which I had been reared, but also because he had helped me a good deal, and probably would do so again, if he survived. At the same time, I was clearly attempting to judge 'the natives' in terms of what I thought was appropriate behaviour. The fact that the Chairman's wife giggled in the Land Rover taking her sick husband to hospital seemed to me to indicate that she did not care about him. It did not occur to me that her giggling may have been nervous, that she may well not have travelled in a vehicle before, and certainly not with a European woman. I was after all young, and had up to that point not experienced serious illness or death in my own family, and learned that there are many ways, often very unexpected, of reacting to crisis. I also made the mistake of assuming that because sickness and death were more prevalent in Mafia than London people would feel less intensely about them. I was soon to be taught an important lesson about that.

The politics of positionality in a multi-ethnic community: Africans, Indians, Europeans

In my first month on Mafia, I came into contact not only with local Mafians of African origin, and with administrators, all of whom were also African, but also with a number of Europeans and Indians. It was through the European 'bush telegraph' that I had been met at Kilindoni airport and invited to stay with the European couple. I was later to meet other plantation owners or managers, and had a very ambivalent relationship with them. On the one hand, I, like them, was a European, and as such, they felt that I should be helped.

On the other hand, many Europeans who had been in Tanzania for some time were what I described in my letters home as 'real old colonialist types', who did not share my views about recent political developments, most of them regarding independence as an unmitigated disaster. One couple warned me against speaking too much with their African cook, stating darkly that they suspected him of communist leanings.

I was scornful of such views, and made extremely uncomfortable by their implicit

racism which I did not know how to handle. If I ventured to disagree with them, I was immediately told that I was a newcomer, whereas they were old hands, or that I had the inexperience of youth, and they the wisdom of age. Since I recognised that there was some truth in such remarks, and that in any case nothing I could say would change their attitudes, I was reduced to silence. I certainly never talked about such matters to anyone on the island, only in letters home and later, to some of the people I got to know at the university. I was in fact, appalled by the continuance of colonialist attitudes in an independent country.

There were more Indians than Europeans on Mafia, although most of the former were concentrated in Kilindoni, where they ran the majority of the shops. They were a mixture of Gujerati Hindus, Bohora Ismailis, Punjabi Sikhs and Goan Catholics. I got to know many of them during the weeks which I spent living there. Like many Europeans, most of the Indians also felt threatened by independence, and many were trying to leave Tanzania. Most of them later succeeded in migrating to Britain and elsewhere and when I returned in 1985, there was only a handful left.

My relations with them were different from those with Europeans. They treated me deferentially, although I did succeed in establishing friendly relations with a few, especially one or two young women. But even those whom I had thought were friends were separated from me by the caste-like barriers which existed between the races in early post-colonial Tanzania. For instance, one man, the manager of a European-owned plantation, helped me a good deal, partly because he had been told to do so by his European boss, but also, I thought, because he and his family liked me. When I left, I sent him some money to give to my ex-cook. The latter wrote to me saying that he had been told by the Indian that he was 'not my slave', and 'it would be better if I made such requests of a fellow European' (*mzungu mwenzako*). I was hurt and puzzled by this at the time, although in retrospect, I can understand his feelings.

Relations with the African administrators were of a different kind again. On the one hand, many of them were undoubtedly sensitive to the fact that they were now running an independent country, and resented any lack of recognition of this fact on the part of Europeans. On the other, for many of them, Europeans were still in positions of authority, and my requests for help or access to records were often treated as commands. I tried hard to establish in their minds that I was a different kind of European from the ones with whom they were familiar. I capitalised on my relatively good Swahili, and sought to build up a picture of myself as interested in and respectful of the culture of Tanzania.

Many senior African administrators were very kind to me, and helpful in terms of research. Yet I became aware that the picture was much more complex than that presented at those heady independence parties I had attended in London, during which we rejoiced that African countries were now being ruled by Africans. These men (they were all male) constituted an elite - the reality of their salaried lives, difficult as it was in many respects, was a far cry from that of

peasant villagers. Furthermore, most of them were not coastal Muslims, but upcountry Africans from more favoured and developed areas of Tanzania like the Kilimanjaro region. They regarded Mafia as a backwater and a posting there as one to leave as soon as possible. Furthermore, they saw their job as being to convince people of the need for *maendeleo* (progress) through self-help (*kujitolea*), something which was not popular with all Mafians.

I did not see myself as fitting comfortably into any of these categories. I was certainly determined not be like the other Europeans whom I met. They in their turn regarded me as a rather eccentric oddity. But then so did the Africans and the Indians.

Finding a village

Meanwhile, I began going around with any government officers who had transport with a view to seeing as many parts of the island as possible, and choosing a village to begin work. One such visit was to the south-east of the island called Utende.

I went with the Chairwoman of the UWT (Tanzania Women's Union) and spent the morning at a meeting there. The women have a cooperative farm, which hasn't done very well, mainly because of drought, but also because of (their) reluctance to work on it, and so there was a big discussion...

Re-reading this now, I note that I assumed that the women needed to be taught hygiene and literacy, and failed to notice that meetings such as these, as well as cooperative farms, further added to women's already considerable work burden, a situation of which I did not really become aware until my third visit in 1985.

After the meeting had finished, I was told that a new boat was being launched nearby and was invited by its owner, a woman, to join the festivities. Afterwards I wrote home:

It was a tremendous 'do', with all the women, whom I soon joined, singing and dancing, and the men pulling the boat onto the shore. I dared for the first time to take some pictures of people, after I had asked permission, and they did not seem to mind at all... Then we went back to the house, and sat drinking tea and eating 'cakes'. All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed myself.

The photographs which I took on that occasion are among the few good ones from my first field-trip, since subsequently, my camera suffered numerous misadventures, and eventually ceased to function, as did its replacement. However, my comments note a feeling which has continued to plague me ever since - I did feel uncomfortable taking pictures of people and was acutely aware that they might feel unhappy about it too. In fact, on that occasion, no one minded, and this happy state of affairs was the usual case when people were dressed in their finery for a ritual. Then they loved to be photographed - seen at their best - but at other times, it was a different story. All too soon after this letter

was written, I was complaining that

The camera has become a bit of a nuisance, since people want copies, and at the moment I've got another colour (slide) film in. I wish I'd brought two cameras.

I visited a number of other villages and recorded to my parents that I had "amused the women immensely by trying to plait mats, grate coconuts and pound cassava." The mat-plaiting was ubiquitous - all women plaited every time their hands could be freed - even when suckling babies or walking along a road. They plaited the raffia into strips, which was then dyed and sewn together to make mats (*mikeka*), used for sitting or sleeping on, or sometimes, if they were especially skilled, prayer mats (*misala*). I bought one of the latter fairly early in my stay in Kilindoni for the sum of 8/- - well above the market price, as I later discovered.

In many of my visits I was accompanied by Jumanne Yusuf, an elderly man who at an early stage 'adopted' me. I was aware that by associating with me, he gained a good deal of prestige, whereas I found him useful because he seemed to know everyone, being very active in TANU. He was also willing to help explain who I was and what I was doing. I visited his house on a number of occasions, the first being October 20th 1965:

Afternoon: To Dongo Jekundu village with Mohammed Said and Jumanne Yusuf. Sat in his house at Milalani. (He has) two wives. Other women came... met Mama Chairman (Chairwoman of the Tanzania Women's Association) there. Then went to front of house, women sat on baraza, men outside, and they asked me questions - about work, farming in England etc. Appeared friendly and responsive. Stayed about two hours.

My letter to LC gives more details about the afternoon visit:

I went on Saturday back to Dongo Jekundu to Jumanne Yusuf's house... There was quite a group of women there, including one who claims to be a hundred and said that she had prepared most of the women present for their marriage. Then we got talking about marriage, and she started to give a very vivid demonstration of the dance that all women here are taught. They were very curious to know if I had slept with a man, but I wasn't telling, and one said 'European women don't because they are afraid of getting pregnant if they aren't married'. They are delightfully down to earth - at the dance yesterday there was a nice song the chorus of which goes "I'm going home, my wife is (i.e. does it) better than you!"

Looking back, I can see that this provided a first introduction to the kinds of questions women asked of me - they wanted to know about my personal life, rather than to hear official explanations for my presence. But on most formal occasions, at which usually only men were present, I would be introduced and my work explained in terms of doing research into Swahili. People were fascinated by the Swahili I already knew, and delighted to teach me new words.

My notebook at this time is littered with vocabulary lists of sometimes quite specialist terms, often connected with coconut cultivation or fishing, and with local colloquialisms.

I soon became adept at explaining myself what I was doing in terms of a study of *national culture*. Quite why I was there was the commonest question put to me, but there were many others, some of them quite unexpected:

Today I was asked about religion in England, the purpose of learning Latin, and the reason why the density of population is greater in Europe than Africa

As I had been warned me, most villagers wanted to know about things like cattle and farming, and I was thankful to be able to dig up memories of childhood holidays spent on a farm near to my grandparents' house.

I became something of a local curiosity and received an invitation from the headmaster of the Aga Khan school in Kilindoni to talk about 'Life in England'. He wrote

We earnestly believe that your valuable advice will enliven our schoolchildren on foreign matters and developments that are rapidly advancing in England.

Unfortunately, I did not keep any notes of whatever it was that I said on that occasion.

By October 23rd, the Land Rover was in some sort of working order, and I was able to begin to use it to get around. At last I felt I was 'getting somewhere', and independently too. Not, however, always as fast as I wanted:

The Land Rover is on the road, although the starter isn't working, so that I have to crank it each time, much to the amusement of everyone in Kilindoni... On Monday I'm going to Bweni (the northernmost village) to see... if there is somewhere for me to live. Accommodation is really a problem in Mafia - and I do wish that I had a tent - a big one - so that I could go anywhere. I shall probably have to choose a village from the point of view of a house more than anything else... On Thursday I went with the AC to a village up in the north... I was taken round by the headman, and talked to the women, also saw some fields. This is a clustered settlement, but there is no accommodation except in a house with a family...

Although I now had a vehicle, it did seem to be causing more problems than it solved. A letter of October 25th is hand-written, and on pages torn from my notebook:

This is likely to be a frequent occurrence, and in future I'll carry aerogrammes (so that I can write letters). I'm sitting in the Land Rover while five men and two boys are taking a wheel to pieces trying to mend a puncture. Seeing the tyres at close quarters, I can't imagine how we got this far, and carrying 15 people most of the way.

The first sentence of this paragraph proved all too prophetic. The Land Rover broke down constantly, and references to its unhappy state pepper my letters for the next three months. On this occasion, however, we managed to get back to Kilindoni with the punctured tyre stuffed with grass. The reason for the trip was to visit again the northernmost settlement, Bweni, 25 miles from Kilindoni. This visit was a success. People were extremely friendly; I spent some time talking to fishermen on the beach and noting the names of different fish. I also attended a wedding:

In Bweni I was lucky to arrive in the middle of a wedding in which the whole village was involved. I got taken to the women's side, where there was dancing, and I had to join in a sort of sexy sloop they do, interspersed with belly dancing... Also played a sort of rattle and subsequently got given a shilling in 5 cent pieces. Then we had the feast, which ... mostly consisted of some horrid beans and cassava, and I was dying of thirst, but didn't dare to drink (the water). Gradually, the women came over to talk a little and then we all went to the TANU office. First the women and then the men had me explained to them, and some of the men asked questions. In the TANU office are two tiny rooms, and these were offered to me as accommodation, but really they are so tiny that I don't see how I can even get a bed in. Also since the rest of the building is where all public meetings are held, there'd be no privacy at all.

Although I did not think that I would be able to live in Bweni because there were no suitable empty houses, I did make some friends on that occasion who continued to be good informants on the numerous occasions when I subsequently visited that village.

On the way back from Bweni, however, we stopped at the next village, Kanga, where I was told that there was an empty house belonging to an Arab shopkeeper who now lived in Kironawe. It was of medium size with verandahs back and front, an entrance hall and two rooms. It was a *safi* house, that is, plastered and whitewashed, with shuttered windows, and a cement floor but was now rather dilapidated and in need of repairs. However, it had distinct possibilities. We drove on to Kironawe to negotiate with the owner, who agreed to repair it, and build a latrine and a bathroom hut for a reasonable rental. I returned to Kilindoni for a further period of waiting while the house was prepared. During this period, I not only continued to visit other parts of the island but also began to look for an assistant.

The search for an assistant

In the 1960s, at British universities, classes in methodology were not well developed. Nonetheless, I had picked up from listening to other anthropologists who had already carried out field-work that it was usual to have an assistant. I wasn't quite sure what this person would do, and in retrospect, it seems like I felt in need of a prop before abandoning the friends I had made in Kilindoni and going off alone to a village which, although only twenty miles up the road, seemed very far away. So I thought I ought to look for one, and communicated

this to the Area Commissioner and others in Kilindoni to see if they knew of anyone suitable. They made various suggestions, as I explained in a letter home:

There are three young Africans on the island doing their national service by helping in 'development schemes'. They have a tremendously difficult task... The A.C. thinks that I ought to get one of these people (to go) with me for a time, as he think that otherwise where I want to go there will be opposition and I won't get any information.

I was not entirely happy about this suggestion because I had soon realised that TANU was not popular with everyone, as the A.C. himself often complained. (Things had deteriorated after the imposition of the copra cooperative by the government, which unfortunately had coincided with a drop in prices.) Nonetheless, I was tempted to take another TANU worker who had accompanied me on some of my trips:

Mohammed is very bright, speaks quite good English, writes Swahili in both Arabic and Roman characters, and at the tender age of 16, is hardly likely to prove a bother.

Then through the Indian network, I was offered another candidate, Salum, who had worked for some Indians:

Salum... is on trial at the moment, but seems reasonably bright, knows Swahili in Arabic and Roman script, and can cook (he says). If all goes well this week, I'll take him with me to whichever village I choose. He is cheerful and willing, so that's something. The other boy, Mohammed, is a TANU subscription collector and this is why I didn't take him... also the fact that he (Salum) doesn't speak any English will improve my Swahili more quickly.

By 27th October, I had definitely decided to hire Salum, and not Mohammed. It was not just because of the latter's association with TANU but because:

I am very much afraid he (Mohamed) has what you might call a 'crush' on me. If I don't take him with me during the day, then he comes and talks to me in the evening, and brings me presents. I hadn't thought about this until a couple of days ago, because he's a young looking 16, but I suppose that means nothing, and I don't think it would be a good idea to live at close quarters. If Salum were to show any (similar) signs, then I'd make him bring his wife along, but I don't think that is too likely. Oh the problems of being a woman!

On Nov. 5th, I visited Kanga again to see if the house was ready; it was - almost. I wrote to my parents in cheerful vein:

I went up on Friday to see the house, and it's really very nice with fresh whitewash, and a deep latrine and wash-hut with a concrete floor. The owner is going to let me have a large tank which I can fill up with enough water to last for

several days, as there isn't much water there. The shop is next door, and I can get rice, kerosene, bread, and there are fish, eggs and fruit in abundance, so I shan't starve at all. Since I have a (kerosene) fridge, I can also get meat from Kilindoni from time to time: have also got some tinned stuff just in case supplies run out.

The house did indeed prove very pleasant to live in, and I certainly never starved - on the contrary I put on weight consistently while I was in Kanga, and everyone except me was happy about that!

I was finally ready to leave on Wednesday November 11th with my Land Rover piled high with my luggage, and the tables and chairs I had ordered to be made locally. Two hours later, I arrived in the village, feeling that 'real' field-work was about to begin.

Conclusion

Goward suggests that most anthropologists cope with two societies - the 'field' and the 'station'. In fact, of course, they also cope with a third - their own. The 'station', which I have described in this chapter, lies somewhere in between the other two. Initially, it is a point of entry, and in my case, enabled me to rehearse grappling with some of the problems which I was to encounter throughout my stay - insects and transport, photography, tape-recording, note-taking. I also had to begin to think about my own attitudes to illness and death, and about the obligations of the field-worker to her subjects. In fact all of these were not only intimately inter-connected, but were also affected by my race, class, gender and age, as well, of course by the kind of anthropology in which I had been trained.

Chapter 2: The first three months in the field

Kanga village - the first week

Wednesday November 10th 1965

A brief one - I'm so tired. Today was moving day, and I thought that the Land Rover would never be ready... and that we'd never get everything in (we did - just!), and further that it would surely break down (it didn't). We arrived here at 1 p.m. and were helped unload by a large number of people - my new neighbours. The house still needs a few improvements (mainly filling up holes which look as if they might harbour cockroaches) but having unpacked (as much as I'll ever be able to), put mosquito netting on windows, had a superb pulao from Salum, and a very much needed wash, things didn't look too bad. Thank goodness for my fridge, polythene wardrobe and radio. Now I'm listening (half) to the 9 p.m. news from London...feelings are a bit mixed...(letter to LC)

My notebook records that I tried to put some order into things upon arrival, but felt rather overwhelmed. However, the first visitors soon arrived - the Village Chairman and Secretary who both asked me a lot of questions about what I had come to do. In my first letter from the village to my parents I wrote that:

Neighbours seem friendly and highly curious - it's so difficult to explain so many things, like why I'm doing this work and not sitting at home with five kids. Now I'm actually 'in the field' I hardly know where to begin, but no doubt, things will gradually sort themselves out.

The next morning, Salum and I drove the eight miles back to Kirongwe to get water. The wells in Kanga village were all very low and the water dirty, as there had been a failure of rains for some time. We had a large petrol tank (*pipa*) which had been cleaned out, and this we filled with water, hoping that it would be sufficient to last us a week.

It was widely known in the village that we were to go to Kirongwe, and a lot of people came to ask for lifts. I did consider charging a small fee, but decided against this, asking instead that they help with filling up the water tank. Perhaps this was not a wise decision, in the light of later events, but at the time, it seemed mean to be asking relatively poor people for money when I was going anyway.

Salum was happy to go to Kirongwe, as his mother lived there, and we went to visit her. A close relative had died two days before, and her house was full of relatives who had come for the funeral. We were invited to the funeral feast (*karamu*) and Koranic reading (*hitima*) both of which were to be held two days later.

Of course, the Land Rover found it hard to cope with a return journey of sixteen miles, large numbers of people each way, and the full water tank. Loaded up with water and people, it broke down just outside Kirongwe - the petrol wasn't passing through - but somehow or other, as usual, someone appeared who

managed to fix things, so off we went, and arrived back safely.

When we returned to Kanga, I had a rest, and then ventured out. I can still vividly remember walking along the main street, and finding a man sitting on his verandah, mending a fishing net. He seemed happy to talk to me, and I asked him about land tenure systems and descent groups. My informant, whose name was Salum Nassor⁵, explained that there were several different ethnic groups in Kanga - the main ones being the Wambwera and Wapokomo, and a small group of Wagunya, fairly recent immigrants from the Lamu area. He also talked about the village, its schools and mosques.

Salum Nassor told me a bit about himself. His father was an Arab from Muscat, and his mother an African, so he called himself a Swahili although I later learned that others usually referred to him as an Arab. Salum had spent three years studying in Muscat as a young man, then had returned to Mafia. In 1965, he had eight children, the eldest of whom was at school in Dar e Salaam, while the youngest, Hadija, had been born only a few days earlier.

Salum was a fisherman and owned a canoe. He told me about fishing in the village, explaining the different seasons and the kind of winds they produced. I wrote down lots of Swahili terms. All in all, it was a good beginning – Salum was one of the most intelligent people in the village, and furthermore, always had a lively curiosity and openness. This conversation with him was the first of many, and members of his family also became my good friends, especially his second daughter Mgeni⁶, still a child in the 1960s, but whom I came to know well on my third visit to the village in 1985, twenty years later.

Later that afternoon, Salum the cook found that he had an old friend in the village, 'Mohamed'⁷, with whom he had once worked on a dhow. The three of us walked down to the beach, about half a mile from the main village, through the village's oldest coconut plantation. Mohamed explained about coconut cultivation, showing us the trees he owned there, and I remember wondering how on earth one could ever tell one tree from another in this vast forest of palms. A year later, Mohamed was to give me one of these trees as a farewell present.

Thus passed my first full day in Kanga, and I felt that I had really fallen on my feet, having met some of the people who were to play a very important part in my field-work. Mohamed became my most important informant, almost an assistant, and his diary, as well as his comments, were to be a vital source for many future publications, especially my 1997 monograph *African Voices, African Lives*.

⁵ Salum was to become one of my best informants and good friends. He was also an excellent correspondent when I was not on Mafia until his death in 2010 when he was in his eighties. There is a transcription on this website of a conversation with him recorded in 2002.

⁶ Mgeni is the subject of the article 'In my office we don't have closing hours'. She died at a relatively young age between my 1994 and 2002 visits.

⁷ This is a pseudonym which I used in publications about this man, who became one of my most important informants

Friday 12th November

I slept much better that night and record that early the following morning, I got my first letter from home, recording that

I thanked him (the bearer) so warmly that he said "but you don't know what's in it?"... I must say I've been feeling the strain these last few days, and it was so wonderful to get a letter. Now having read it, I feel fine and ready to tackle anything (letter to LC)

The 'anything' soon arrived on my doorstep - a young man who announced that his wife planned to visit me, then two young women who stayed quite a while, then an elderly woman with her daughter, and the latter's newly born child. At first I was not able to connect up these people but later discovered that one was the sister of Mohamed, while her companion was the sister of my next-door neighbour, the shop-keeper. The elderly woman with her daughter and the baby were the wife and mother-in-law of Salum Nassor.

So I've been writing down genealogies as fast as I could, which they seem quite happy to give, and this seems to be the simplest way of starting. They don't object to my taking notes, and quite often say "Write that down" if I haven't.

I have a large fenced courtyard behind my house, but the present door to it leads out onto the road, and people coming in have to pass the shop where the men gather to talk, so the women have said it would be a good idea to put a door on the other side, so that they need not be seen by the men⁸ if they come to visit me.

So the women, as I had anticipated, are not difficult, so far. The men, on the other hand, are rather mixed, and since they seem to grasp more fully what I'm doing, some are more suspicious, while others are friendly and ready to give information (letter to LC).

I had more visitors that day including Mohamed who explained the confusion over names - all women, and many men, have both a childish and an adult name. In addition, many of them have nicknames, and they would also be referred to as the daughter or son of so and so - using either the father's nickname or his given adult name.

On this visit, Mohamed told me a bit more about himself. He was born in Kanga, but didn't know in what year, although I estimated that he was then aged around 30. He began at an early age to study the Koran but when he was older, he ran away and worked as a sailor in dhows travelling up and down the coast. On several occasions he travelled to Zanzibar and picked cloves for a couple of months. Then he married a classificatory cousin by whom he currently had five children. In my notebook I record "Mohamed refused to budge until Salum more

⁸ Until relatively recently, in accord with coastal Islamic norms, women would seek to avoid passing in front of men in a public place.

or less threw him out" and the next entry, for the following day (13th November), that he borrowed a shilling, the first of many such loans.

That day I decided to pay a return visit to the wife of Salum Nassor, whose name was Masuda. I found her and her mother plaiting mats, and we talked about this for some time. As I watched, Masuda and her mother proceeded to 'cook' (dye) some already plaited strips of raffia.

We also discussed the recent wedding of one of the village school teachers, who was related to them; he had married his second wife the previous day. A number of women dropped into the courtyard while I was there to have their hair plaited - Masuda was reckoned to be the most skilled woman in the village at this job, although later, she had to confess herself defeated by my hair – 'much too soft'. Some of them paid for their hair-dressing in money, some in goods, with one woman bringing a bundle of wood.

After lunch that day, Salum and I, accompanied by a crowd of others, went to visit the swamp (*bwawa*) in the centre of the village, which had almost dried up because of the drought. People were thus able to dig up eels (*ndobe*) and a number of men were so engaged. The first photographs which I took in Kanga and which turned out well are of this activity, which was taking place with a good deal of merriment. It was on this occasion that I first met another man who was also to become an important informant - Mohammed Athman, or as he was known more popularly 'Mzee Nyembo'⁹.

On returning to the village we met with Mohamed's sister and offered her a lift. She said that she was on her way back from a circumcision ritual in Bweni and told us there was to be a different kind of ritual *ngoma* taking place that night, although I could not understand what it was about. Nonetheless, I thought I would investigate:

*11.30 p.m. saw us going off, me dressed in trousers with the bottoms cut off and a skirt on top, and plastered in insect repellent. This was an exorcising dance, and really quite fascinating, with lots of spirit possession - all highly contra Islam. An old man led the singing with a chorus of women. Five men danced, carrying sticks. Various people joined in dancing at different times, then rested. Each dance lasted about 5 minutes, and at around 1.15 a.m. they had a break and people smoked and laughed. Some had spirits (in them i.e. were possessed) especially Bwana Mganga (the shaman) who fell on the floor, wept, shrieked, and the spirit spoke through him. Men and women were possessed... One man who became possessed sat on one side with three women beside him and he divined (*kupiga ramli*). They talked about a sick child.*

No one seemed to mind my being there, nor my tape-recorder, although it went wrong in the dark, and I've just spent the evening with some of my new friends unravelling a great length of tape which had got hopelessly tangled. I stayed until 3.30 a.m. then rushed home for a couple of hour's

⁹ See interview with him in 1994 on this website

sleep, although I felt very guilty indeed. However, I knew that I had a full day ahead of me, with another ritual to attend, and I didn't think I'd keep awake without some sleep.

Returned at 5.30 a.m., people still dancing, but not so many, then more came. The mganga dragged (off) a lot of people, some to dance, some to sit on the bed and become possessed. At 6.45 a.m. they brought out food - eggs, bananas, sugar, and spices - f from inside the house for the shaman. Then they danced a different dance and he wore a new black kaniki (waist cloth). People who danced got some of the food, especially the sugar. Then they brought a second child, the small sister of the boy they had brought in the night. The mganga examined her a bit, then her father took her away.

The ritual which I witnessed that night was called *mwingo* and was one of the many kinds of spirit possession rituals (*ngoma* = dance) held in northern Mafia not actually to exorcise spirits at all, but to placate them. One of the shamans of this dance turned out to be Mohamed's wife's father. I was later to discover that this particular *mwingo* ritual was at that time rarely performed in Kanga, in fact no more were held for another year, but it was not dissimilar to the *kitanga* rituals which I was to witness many times. That first experience of a spirit possession ritual made a deep impression on me – I found it riveting, horrifying, inexplicable.

By 11 a.m. that morning I was in Kirongwe at the funeral feast for cook Salum's relative. The food preparations were in full swing, and, as a guest of honour, I was called inside the house and given some meat to eat. The men were seated outside, but unfortunately

I ran out of film and so missed some lovely shots of 100 men sitting in white kanzu (gowns) in two rows facing each other, first to read [the Koran] and then to eat...By 2.10 p.m. many men had finished eating and got up to leave gradually.... As I left at 3.30 p.m. the women were just beginning to eat.

As the time. I did not comment upon the fact that the women, who had cooked the food, had to wait at least one and a half hours until the men had finished, nor that I myself had been served with the men.

Salum's wife, Fatuma, whom we had met at the feast, appeared unwell, and so it was decided that she should come and stay in Kanga for a while, together with the child she was bringing up¹⁰. At first I was not very happy about this arrangement, as I did not want to support a whole family, and thought that it would decrease privacy in the house. But only a few days later I wrote that

I like her very much, and she is intelligent and helpful. She doesn't get in the

¹⁰ Many children on the coast are reared by people other than their parents under the system known as 'ulezi'. Usually a couple with no children will be 'given' one to bring up by a more fortunate sibling, and older people left alone will usually have a grandchild living with them. In Kanga village in the 1960s I found that 25% of children were being fostered in this way.

way, except that a lot of oil, water and food is being used. I feel sorry for her being left by herself in Kilindoni, and can hardly tell her to walk back.

Fatuma was to become a very good friend, and an enormous help in interpreting the girls' puberty ritual. She frequently came and stayed for extended periods, and I was always sorry when she left to go and look after her fields.

Monday November 15th

That morning I received another visit from Masuda and Mgeni, the wife and mother-in-law of Salum Nassor.

Mgeni and Masuda also explained how the Muslim lunar calendar works. Then we got on to discussing birth and the customs surrounding it - the forty days impurity for the mother, the special food she eats (rice gruel, chicken broth, ginger and coffee), the way babies are fed (breast milk supplemented by cows' or powdered milk for those who can afford it). Then they told me about the girls' puberty ritual (unyago¹¹) which had just been held in Bweni, and about various spirit possession dances. I felt that information was flowing in.

I took advantage of their loquacity to take down Mgeni's genealogy, which was quite a long one. Fatuma commented that she was able to remember it so well because many Arabs write down their genealogies.

There was a lull after they had left. I decided I had better practise taking down genealogies, and asked Salum the cook to give me his. At that point, I discovered that in addition to the business about proper names and nicknames, childish and adult names, some people also change their names, particularly if they had been ill. It seemed as if confusion was piled upon confusion, and I wondered how I would ever get all these relationships put into some sort of order.

In the evening, I was visited by the Village Executive Officer (VEO) a pleasant young man from the south of the island, posted to Kanga to do community development work. Thereafter he often came and sat in my house, sometimes just to let off steam. He maintained that people in Kanga just weren't interested in 'progress' (*maendeleo*) and 'building the nation' (*kujenga nchi*), and on the whole he was right. Many people assumed that that this must be why I had come to Kanga too, and I had to keep explaining that this was not my job.

I seem to have written quite a lot of letters that day, feeling by now settled enough to send positive reports back home to my parents:

Food is proving no problem now that people know that I'm here. For one thing I always get a present of eggs or fruit or something if I go to someone's house,

¹¹ See Caplan 1976 "Boys' circumcision and girls' puberty rites among the Swahili of Mafia Island Tanzania" *Africa* 46, 1: 21-33.

and then people are also very anxious to sell eggs, bread, milk, fish and meat...

There aren't so many mosquitoes here as in Kilindoni, but I'm still bitten all over. Neither, thank heaven, are there any cockroaches, although quite a few mice. I had a present of a hen the other day, and then one of the eggs we bought hatched out, so there's also a chick whom Salum named centi kumi na tano (15 cents), much to everyone's amusement.

It was only later that I discovered that part of the amusement lay in the price I was paying for eggs - 50% above the current rate of ten cents - no wonder people were anxious to sell eggs to me!

In another letter I wrote that

I'm in the centre of an elaborate series of gift exchanges - I get eggs, pawpaws, cashew nuts, etc and give out oranges [from my tree], cold water (from the fridge) and lifts. In return for the latter, those who come (to Kirongwe) help to fill up my tank. (LC let.)

But sometimes there were just too many visitors:

One of the great disadvantages of fieldwork is that you can never call your house your own - I have resorted to shutting myself up and telling Salum to tell people I'm asleep, so that I can write up my notes before they become unintelligible.

Meanwhile, in an effort to get closer to the women, I had begun to wear *khanga*, the local dress. This consisted of a cloth wrapped round the chest and falling to the knees, and another thrown over the shoulders and head. I decided initially not to wear them all the time, since I wanted to preserve my 'stranger' status, as I wrote to my parents, "As a European women, I'm able to mix reasonably freely with the men".

Thus by the end of November, I was able to write cheerfully to my parents:

The house is now quite nice, with shelves for books, food and odds and ends, the mouse-holes filled in, and the veranda repaired. There are still a few things to be done, but then this is not the place to get things done in a hurry. Salum is still proving satisfactory, especially in the way of cooking - this week I've had beef, fish and today was given a guinea fowl - the other day it was a hen which quickly landed up in the pot.

Other food which was enjoyed as it came into season was fruit - mangoes, pawpaws and oranges - indeed, there was an orange tree growing in the courtyard of my house.

Another pleasant aspect of life was the beach. At the beginning I scarcely had time to go there, and then swimming was difficult because of lack of clean water

with which to bath afterwards. Later, when the water problem eased, I began to swim once or twice a week. The beach was usually deserted, since most of the fishermen clustered at its southern end where there was a little peninsula and a tidal creek, so I did not feel embarrassed about wearing a swimsuit. If there were people around, I tied a *khanga* around my neck and swam wearing that.

The first report

I wrote my first report to my supervisor at this time, that is, after two and a half months in Kanga village... This was the longest report I produced, and I was myself surprised how much I thought I knew. It consisted of an introduction to the island and the village, and then was divided into the then anthropological foursome of politics and economics, religion, and kinship. In the first section, there is a description of the administrative set-up, the settlement and communication patterns, and the attitudes to recent political changes including such new schemes introduced by TANU as planting cotton, the formation of a copra cooperative, and self-help schemes. I then considered the political life of the village, and the conflict between the 'official' meetings, organised by the Village Executive Officer, and the unofficial *baraza* called to discuss disputes.

I also attempted to describe what I knew of the kinship and descent systems, but it is plain that at this stage, I was still confused:

There are two terms - ukoo and tumbo - the former consists of all descendants of a male ancestor, the latter of all descendants of a female ancestor.

My assumption was obviously that what existed in Mafia was a system of double descent, such as Forde had described for the Yako¹².

A major part of this section of the report was on the life cycle - birth, puberty, marriage, divorce, polygyny and death and I note how little choice women exercise in relation to marriage.

In the following part of the report, I considered 'religion', first of all discussing Islam and its institutions and rituals, and then spirit possession. I had seen three spirit possession rituals by this time - two *kitanga* in Bweni village which had been difficult to follow up because of distance and one *mwingo* in Kanga - but the onset of Ramadhan had put a stop to such activities. Although I realised that there would be much work to do before I was able to understand what was happening here, I note that

In spite of the homogeneity of religion, it seems that two categories emerge, those who participate in this spirit possession cult, and those who do not. I cannot yet see clearly the connections with kinship, but the kinship networks of the Sheikh, the ex-Imam, and the Koranic teachers are not involved in this

12 D. Forde, 1950. 'Double descent among the Yako' in A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde (eds.) *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*. International African Institute/Oxford University Press.

practice... However, there is no category of non-participants in Islamic practices. Everyone has fasted during Ramadhan, or at least, they all claim to fast, and no dances of any kind are held.

The next section of the report looked at the village economy, considering how cash is made, mainly through the sale of copra, with some fishing and trading, migration and ownership of animals, and how rights in land were obtained, namely through kinship. Here I referred to the *ukoo* as a 'bilateral descent group', thus contradicting what I said earlier, but more nearly approaching the truth, as it turned out.

I wrote in some detail about the conflict between the allocation of land by kinship and descent, and the laws propagated by the government, which stated that any citizen has a right to cultivate anywhere, and gave examples of disputes arising out of this.

I concluded the report by puzzling over whether or not I should hire an assistant in the conventional anthropological sense:

He would have to be an outsider and this would be difficult both getting people used to a new face, and also because, as a woman, but a European and a stranger, I can move freely between the two sexes, whereas a man would be confined almost exclusively to the group... I am rather inclined to dispense with such services, since I'm not sure what I could use him for, and I don't need an interpreter.

My report was read by a number of people, including my two supervisors Philip Gulliver and Wilfred Whiteley, and three fellow students, all of whom had recently finished their own field-work, and were writing their theses. I still have copies of comments from four of these people.

Phil Gulliver's letter was a model of what a supervisor's response to a report from a student in the field should be. First of all, he was pleased with the report, and was generous in his praise - this I found encouraging, surely the most important message a supervisor should give a student. Secondly, it was a long and detailed letter (three pages of single-spaced foolscap), which showed that he had read my report carefully, and thought about its contents.

He made a few suggestions - to 'get all the genealogical stuff you can, together with places of residence of each person and each wife's father's brother' and to find out 'what is the potential range of *jamaa*, and the actual range who comprise the action set'. At every event I should try to record who is there and why, and to make plans of agricultural fields. As he said, I would expect him to be most interested in this side of things since he was at that time working on his Ndendeuli material¹³, which he had put aside for many years, not knowing how to analyse a society which did not appear to fit neatly into the model of unilineal

¹³ This later appeared as *Neighbours and Networks* (1971) University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles.

descent groups. He concluded his letter by suggesting that I read up on networks, fields, and action sets - Barnes, Bott, Bailey, Mayer et al.

Phil commented at length on my question about finding an assistant, and described what he himself looked for in such a person:

You might want someone with whom you could try and build up something of a special friendship and relationship, i.e. someone who could bring you all the gossip and latest news which otherwise you might not hear, or only later; someone with whom you can carry on a continuous discussion of village affairs etc, and who can, if necessary, act as go-between for you and villagers who don't know or don't trust you very much; someone merely to share living in the village with and who can occasionally tell you not to be a fool (when you are being one!) - that is a friend. I think that this is what I look for in an assistant.... It will be different for you, because your field situation is unique for you, and you are a woman. I doubt if you'll get a reliable woman assistant, though you might encourage any congenial woman to come and gossip etc. with you.

In retrospect, I realise that I did find such people, both women and men, right there in the village, although I had assumed, foolishly, that an assistant would have to be someone with some western-type education. I found people to record disputes for me, either from memory or writing them in *Kiarabu* (Arabic script); with some of these I discussed my work, and with not a few I had special friendships. And fortunately, there were those who told me when I was doing or saying something stupid, or worse.

A few examples come to mind. One day I was wearing *khanga*, but carrying something on my head. I had put my upper kanga on my head, beneath the burden, but it flowed in the wind, leaving my shoulders bare. A female neighbour saw me walking along and told me: 'cover yourself, this is inappropriate'. On another occasion, I had seen a few wild flowers in a walk to the southern part of the village. I picked a few and put them in a jar in the house. A group of women came on a visit: 'What are you decorating your house like this for? Are you getting married or what?' I removed the flowers and did not repeat the exercise.

But perhaps the most important lesson I was taught concerned the death of a child. The married daughter of one of my neighbours came home to her parents' house to bear a child, as is the custom on Mafia. A few days after the birth, I heard that the child had died. Shortly afterwards, I met this woman by chance. She berated me: 'Why did you not come to condole with me? Didn't you care that I had lost a child? Didn't you feel sympathy?' I was not only embarrassed, but also ashamed of my unconscious assumption that because women had many children on Mafia, they valued them any less than would women in the West. It was an important lesson.

Problems

Only a few weeks after I had arrived in the village, Ian Smith declared unilateral

independence for southern Rhodesia, and Tanzania's President Nyerere took a firm stand on this. My letter of 4th December to LC was gloomy:

I have just been listening to the local news and Nyerere's latest pronouncement is that if diplomatic relations are severed in ten days time, then British citizens may have to leave the country...I believe that there are a lot of demonstrations in Dar, but here of course, no trouble, and I'm not worried in that respect.

I also wrote to try and reassure my anxious parents:

Re Rhodesia - I'm sure you don't need to worry, especially out here, where people on Mafia are far from being strongly nationalist and not very politically conscious anyway. You must realise that my apparent weakness (a young woman alone) is in fact my strength – no one could possibly gain any benefit from hurting me, and in fact they are only too anxious to 'mother' or 'father' me.

Perhaps I was being naive, but gradually a feeling of safety was growing upon me. One evening, I got back home late from the fields. I was met by my 'elder brother' Malim and some others in the village: 'Where have you been? Didn't you think we might be worried about you? Don't you realise we are responsible for you?'

Nonetheless, the Rhodesian crisis worsened, and I began to worry that I might get expelled and have my field-work curtailed. On December 6th, I was attending a meeting of the Village Council, whose members, as usual, were being given a lecture by the Village Executive Officer. After telling them that they needed to cultivate more and send all their children to school, he suddenly began to talk about Rhodesia. He explained that Smith had seized independence for the benefit of the few Europeans there, not for the majority of Africans, and he asked them what they had done about it. The Chairman asked him what they should have done. The VEO replied:

There is a need for the free African states to stand together. There has been a conference in Addis Ababa, and a resolution passed that African states should break diplomatic relations with Britain. The effect of this could be that all British people - doctors, teachers, and her (pointing to me) - will have to leave.

I sat stunned while the villagers at the meeting looked extremely uncomfortable - they obviously felt quite out of their depth. For the first time, I began seriously to wonder if this was to be the end of my field-work. Fortunately, this was not the case as I wrote to LC:

Did think I might be home for Christmas but now Nyerere has given an assurance (yesterday) that British citizens will not be asked to leave if diplomatic relations are broken, and will be looked after as usual. So I shall be staying, it seems. There's no political awareness here on Mafia at all, especially in Kanga - life continues as usual and people are kind to me... I've just seen the Area Commissioner... he's just back from Dar and says not to worry, so I'm not and

don't you.

In fact, when I visited Kilindoni a few days later for the Republic Day celebrations, many people asked me if I was all right and told me not to worry. The same message had already been repeated in the village. I felt that I had been 'adopted' and that people were concerned for my well-being.

The second and more long-standing problem was the Land Rover:

Things are continuing to go fairly well here, although I've started running up against problems. The first is the vehicle - it has broken down again. I went to Bweni yesterday for a funeral and had terrible trouble. I've written to Kilindoni for spares and a mechanic, but goodness knows how long this will take. The main problem is water - I've been getting it from Bweni and Kirongwé, so it looks as if for the next few days, I shall be having to go to the (local) wells in the middle of the night like other people here do, as in the day-time, the sun dries them up completely.

However, apart from its running problems, the car is going to prove a nuisance in that everyone wants lifts, and they just don't understand that if I carry 15 people in the back over these roads, it's 100 to 1 that I get a puncture. Yesterday there was a funeral in Bweni and half the population of Kanga came. When I left the funeral, there was a large number of women with me, and a larger crowd of men waiting by the cr. I said I would take some old women, but several men already sitting in refused to get out until I got really angry. This was complicated by the fact that the young chap who is the Divisional Executive Officer... was with us, and the men who refused to get out said that he should walk. As I'd brought him with me, I refused - they all just think they can pile in without permission, but this is going to create a lot of bad feeling.

... Today I was just preparing to go to the funeral when the dresser¹⁴ turned up and said a woman had born twins, the after-birth wouldn't come out, and she had to get to hospital. Well what could I do? I carted them all off to Kirongwé, and then insisted that they get another vehicle. Bu this time I was again very tired, the roads are in an awful state, and driving one mile here is like 10 miles in terms of concentration and effort... Returned back home, more rows with people wanting lifts, and I was so exhausted, hot and cross...

The car is becoming far more of a liability than asset, and people can't understand that it is expensive and time-consuming to run them around. This week I reckon I've spent two afternoons, one whole day and one morning doing just that, but purely from humanitarian motives one can't refuse. Now after some sleep and relaxation (Salum has nobly kept people at bay) I feel better - only three weeks and I shall have a break. Sorry this has been such a moan, it does relieve my feelings, and if you have any bright ideas about lifts and petrol and people dying on my doorstep I'd be glad of them.

Initially, I had felt I needed the Land Rover to get back and forth to Kilindoni,

¹⁴ Dressers were minimally trained medical assistants

some twenty five miles away over rough terrain, for shopping. Then I became dependent upon it to get water, a notion encouraged by Salum who was glad to go to Kirongwe to see his mother, and who did not want to have to fetch water from distant wells in Kanga. Gradually, I began to wonder if it might be possible to manage without a Land Rover, especially once the rains came and water was available locally. Had the drought not lasted so long, I might have made the decision sooner, but my need to have a vehicle was psychological as well as practical - I felt at the beginning that I had to be able to get out if I needed to do so quickly.

There were a number of 'final straws' which made me decide that I should get rid of the vehicle. One was when the fishing company tried to make me pay for the spare parts as well as the rent and I realised that the Land Rover was consuming most of my grant. The other was when the dresser in Kanga again came and told me that someone was very sick and needed to be taken to Kirongwe. As I was leaving with a singularly healthy-looking patient, the former asked me to get him some cigarettes (the village shops had run out), and I felt that I had been conned.

A third was an incident which happened at the end of December:

28th December 1965

People are beginning to get slightly on my nerves, and perhaps I on theirs, since tempers are very frayed with fasting and much work in the fields. The culmination of annoyances came today when, on returning from a distant part of the village, I was continually pestered by children for a ride in the Land Rover. Finally, I let them get in and on arrival back at the house, I heard that one had fallen off half way - fortunately he only cut his lip. It appears that the idiot had decided to get out and return home before we reached the village so he just jumped!

However, I feel very responsible for letting any child get in at all, and certainly won't in future. It was difficult to refuse without seeming mean, but I think they will realise now. The VEO has suddenly put on his 'Village Officer' act and insisted on writing a report to the police, together with a signed statement from me. This may also cause bother, since I suppose I could be had up for breaking some law or other - happily, everyone here thinks he is being over-officious, and they don't blame me for the accident.

In fact, the incident and the VEO's handling of it paradoxically worked in my favour:

30/12/65

It was comforting that although the VEO tried to make the parents of the boy who fell (jumped) off the Land Rover press for a charge, they refused to make a statement and said it certainly wasn't my fault, and in the end, he brought back my statement and said let's forget the matter. (LC let. 41)

Furthermore, the Land Rover brought me two *masomo*:

3/12/65

Yesterday I went into Kilindoni unexpectedly to take a woman having a baby. She had been in labour for two days, and the waters had already broken - it was her first, and I was very much afraid that she would produce in the Land Rover, but all went well, and three hours after arriving she had a fine boy. I should think the two-hour drive over those awful roads, made even worse by all the rain we have had recently, was enough to shake out even the most obstinate baby.

Apart from normal 'humanitarian' feelings, this of course has improved my position public-relations wise even more. I've been made the baby's somo, which is very approximately like a godparent - I have to take an interest, can refuse it nothing, and am supposed to give it sexual instruction! In addition, they asked me to choose the name, so I'm very honoured. (letter to M and D)

I called this baby Hassan. When I went back to Tanzania in 1985 he had moved to live in Dar es Salaam; he was a tall and handsome lad but with no specific occupation - as he put it he 'managed'. The other *somo* was one of the twins whose mother I had taken to Kiringwe when she had trouble giving birth. I named this boy Hussein, but in fact, he is always known as Bel (Bailey) after my father.

Field-work methods

By this time of year, most people were spending their days out in the fields, and perforce, I had to do so as well. At the beginning, I used the vehicle to travel along the road to the nearest point of cultivation for that year:

At the moment, everyone is in the fields from morning to night and yesterday I went for the first time to the fields out in the bush - about an hour's walk from here, although fortunately, I can park the Land Rover only ten minutes' walk away. There are absolutely miles of field, as each family cultivates 1-2 acres, and then in a different place they all cultivate 1 acre or so of cassava, in addition to the fields near the village which are cultivated all the time. At the moment, it is nigh impossible to see boundaries in the bush fields until the fences are built to keep out the wild animals (pigs, hippo), so I've decided to concentrate on the village fields for the moment.

People are so varied in their responses to questions - one woman said 'You are frightening us - are you a Bwana Shamba (agricultural officer) for the government?', while others are pleased and willing to answer questions. In fact, on the whole, it is still the women rather than the men who are afraid of me - several have lied about their names, fearing, I suppose, to be 'written down'.

However, I persisted in my investigations of agriculture and land tenure, reporting that:

Have been planting rice and hoeing land until my hands are very blistered - this has impressed people no end, and I'm told that I shall eat all the rice I want for free when the harvest comes. I must say that I rather enjoy this work, and I'm getting a nice tan...One chap here wants to marry me - he says I cultivate so well, and I can teach him to read. This has aroused great amusement, but he has now settled for (marrying) one of my cousins and started to save up the fare to bring her out to Tanzania from the UK – a big joke!.

Within a few days, however, my hands were too blistered to continue hoeing for long periods, and thereafter, people always told me to do 'just a little bit' because, as they remarked sympathetically, 'You're not used to it - your work is the pen'.

By this time, everyone was living out in the fields, and for that reason, as well as Ramadhan, not much of note was happening in the village. I was beginning to have my fill of tramping round them, and no longer had the Land Rover:

I've been working mainly in the fields lately, as I said, but they are so widely scattered. Yesterday I went twice to the muhogo (cassava) fields, 45 minutes walk each way, and the fields themselves extend over miles. Then there are the fields out in the bush, on a system of shifting cultivation - these are all over an hour's walk away. Then there are fields scattered around the village in clearings in the forest in which rice is also grown on about a five years on, one or two off basis. Finally, there are gardens around some houses, where people use cow dung (as a fertiliser) and cultivate permanently. All in all, it's quite daunting, if I'm to focus on land, and this seems the most obvious thing (49)

I was concentrating on land tenure, not only because that had been the topic of my M.A. thesis, but because I was sure that this would provide the clue to the kinship system:

Then there is kinship, which as I said is terribly complicated. There are bi-lateral descent groups, but no one seems to be able to define these clearly, and they also seem to use the (same) terms for ego-centred networks. The matter is further complicated by the fact that these mainly function with reference to land, especially in the bush. Each descent group formerly had a certain portion of the bush but this has been discouraged by the government; people say that they are no longer functioning in this way, although I'm fairly sure that they are. The only way in which to work this out is to find out where each man cultivates, and who he cultivates with, and see if there is any 'statistical' norm, since the 'jural rules' are so hard to come by..(LC let 49)

By November 19th, I had finished my first notebook, and the second was filled by December 5th. It was mainly because I felt that I needed some time to digest and type up all this material, as well as to witness the celebrations of Jamhuri (Republic Day), that I took myself off to Kilindoni. While I was in the village, there just wasn't time. As I wrote to my parents:

The last few days before I left Kanga were very busy - two weddings, a spirit possession ritual and a meeting of the village council.

Even when not involved in such events, I was trying to complete my map and make an initial census, and when I was at home, people constantly visited me. In fact I never did get around to typing out all my notebooks.

I decided to stay with my European friends on the plantation and indulge in the luxury of some real baths. I had looked forward to this first stay away from the village, and expected to enjoy being in Kilindoni again, but actually found it quite depressing, and was glad to get back to the village. I did not plan to leave again soon:

I've declined the invitation to (the plantation) for pheasant (tinned from Fortnums!) and Christmas pud and shall remain here in solitary state to open my parcels (LC let 18).

It was quite a surprise to realise that I now felt more at home in the village than in Kilindoni.

As I had been able to charge up the battery for my tape recorder while in the south, I decided to invite the village to a 'tea-party' (biscuits and coffee actually), so that they could hear the recordings I had been making. People had constantly asked to have them played back, and finally I followed LC's example from his fieldwork, and said I would do so in one long session, as otherwise I would keep running out of batteries. The event was a great success, and I had to repeat it at regular intervals thereafter.

Things continued to go well. I was glad I'd decided not to go to Kilindoni for Christmas, as I was becoming aware that a report was due in to my supervisor. However, I did take some time off on Christmas day to write home to LC, who was visiting my parents:

Your Christmas may be roast turkey and pudding and snow and ice, but mine is an empty stomach (Ramadhan)¹⁵ and an eight hour day before deciding to knock off at 4 p.m. to retire to my favourite beach a couple of miles from the village and bask in the sun, write to you and to my parents and sister to thank them for their presents (which included a Christmas cake) ... until the sun goes down and I can return home to my Christmas dinner - rice, meat, fish, chapatis, mangoes - and cake.

Another method of gaining information came from requests to type out documents and letters for people which meant that petitions to the court in Kilindoni, land records, and letters from the Village Chairman and Council to the

¹⁵ I cannot claim to have fasted the full month of Ramadhan in any of my visits to Mafia, but I certainly would not eat or drink in front of people who were fasting. During this first visit, it would not have been appropriate to ask the cook, himself fasting, to prepare food for me during the day.

district capital began to pass through my hands. This I was happy to do, both to provide a service and because it was useful to me. Sometimes, however, the constant procession of people in and out of my house, as well as the problems with the Land Rover, made me feel tired and depressed. At times like this, I shut myself up in my room, and either slept (I seemed to have an endless capacity for sleep), or else read something far removed from Mafia.

By 7th January 1966 I had finished all the novels I had brought with me or received in the post and report that my long-standing resolutions to read *The Spanish Civil War* and *The History of Western Philosophy* tended to fade after a day spent interviewing, walking long distances, or battling with the Land Rover. Accordingly, I was re-reading Chaucer's *Tale of the Wife of Bath*.

Visit to Dar

By mid January, the third week of Ramadhan, I was feeling I needed to get away from the village for a while. With the increasing heat and the continuance of fasting, tempers were getting frayed, and I also felt I needed to take stock of my material. I was also somewhat dreading the flood of invitations to rituals such as weddings, circumcisions and spirit possession dances which I knew would arrive as soon as Ramadhan was over. I also thought that I should give a first-hand report on my field-work to my acting supervisor, Wilfred Whiteley.

I finally left Kanga after a week of continuous rain on 22nd January 1966, slightly earlier than I had planned since, as I wrote to LC, "It became apparent that nothing was going to happen at Id (the end of Ramadhan) in Kanga except a lot of rain and mud - no exciting contributions to Kanga's social structure."

I spent some time shopping and reading in the university library. I finally got to see Wilf Whiteley on January 30th, and report this encounter in a letter:

Yesterday I at last saw Whiteley - I was disappointed because he wants me to do all sorts of things that I'm not sure I can tackle, e.g. a socio-linguistic study of religion. I'm now looking at some of Turner's stuff on Ndembu religion to see what I can make of it. I remember you saying that it was ritual that didn't seem to 'fit' - I feel the same... I suppose that he is right - my views have been somewhat confined by my M.A. reading, and it might be a good idea, for various reasons, to look at other things. Anyway, we agreed it was a bit too early to narrow the field yet. (LC. let.)

Wilfred confessed being bored by economic issues, but sent me off to see the Professor of Economics at the university This didn't help much either:

It wasn't very fruitful as I'd only vague ideas about what I wanted to ask him, so it just ended up with a general discussion and (another!) reading list, two or three books in which economists have used anthropological material (LC let 56).

However, I did come across one article which interested me - it was on cognatic

descent systems by Robin Fox in the *Penguin Survey of the Social Sciences* for 1965, and it was the first time I had seen an anthropologist take such systems seriously, and propose them as of equal theoretical importance to matriliney and patriliney. It seemed to confirm that I was on the right track there.

Nonetheless, I went back to Mafia in early February feeling that my expectations of sorting out my research priorities had not been met:

I've about had enough of Dar. It's been rather disappointing really. I've not relaxed properly, nor have I accomplished much else ... haven't talked to anyone who was very helpful about work, so net total of 11 days away is a lot of money spent.!

I was met at the airport in Kilindoni by Salum with the news that a government vehicle inspector had been to Mafia to examine all the vehicles, and that he had only passed two on the island as fit to use. Mine, needless to say, was not one of them. It was at this point that I wrote to the company and told them that I wanted to get rid of it. I got a lift up to Kanga with the government Land Rover, and planned to see if I could manage without a vehicle.

In spite of my initial opposition to Wilf Whiteley's suggestions, some of them must have sunk in, because among my first letters to LC on returning to the village are requests for copies of Turner's Rhodes-Livingstone papers, and the ASA volume on *Anthropological Approaches to Religion*. Even LC seemed to be caught up in the new interest in the anthropology of religion, for in his comments on the copy of the report which I had sent him is the following:

Vic Turner would probably be very interested in which spirits require a black cow to be sacrificed and which a white cow (these colours are very significant he argues) - during the kitanga. He would also probably ask if any red clothes are used as part of the costume for the ritual (of course, the blood they drink is red).

I thus felt myself on the horns of a dilemma. Was I, as Whiteley suggested, to concentrate my energies on spirit possession and matters religious and symbolic - a task for which I felt my training had ill-prepared me, but which nonetheless, was fascinating and could not be ignored? Or was I to continue concentrating upon land tenure and kinship, as I had originally set out to do, and which Phil supported?

This could have been a crucial moment in the future of my field-work. Wilf Whiteley did his best to persuade me to change tack, even suggesting that it would not be difficult for him to get me a further grant if I needed more time to do the kind of work he had in mind. I was torn. On the one hand, I had already settled in my mind that my study was to be on land tenure and kinship; that was the literature I was familiar and felt comfortable with, and it was the direction that my supervisor in London, and British anthropology generally, seemed to be pointing towards. On the other hand, I was fascinated by the drama of the spirit possession, and was aware that ritual and symbolism was becoming a fashionable topic in anthropology.

I did in fact, continue to collect a great deal of material on spirit possession, and I even began to collect and analyse songs, at Wilfred's behest. Yet, for many years most of this material sat unused in my notebooks - both my Ph.D. thesis, and the subsequent monograph used only a fraction of what I had on spirit possession cults, and then only in relation to kinship and descent. It was not until the 1990s that I returned to the topic and began to publish on it.

Chapter Three. More on fieldwork: the second half

Feb-July 1966: field-work in Kanga village

Mid-July to mid-August: holiday on mainland with LC

August-September: Kanga village

October: 2 weeks in Banja village, northern Mafia

November – March: field-work in Baleni village, southern Mafia

December: visit to other parts of coast (Kilwa, Mombasa, Lamu) and to East African social science conference, Nairobi.

I returned from Dar es Salaam in early February and settled down to a routine. This middle period of field-work lasted to mid-July, followed by a break of just over a month when I went for a holiday on the mainland to meet my partner. I then returned to Kanga for another month before moving to Baleni, a southern village, for the remaining four months of fieldwork. During this period I visited Kanga twice, and also took another break at Christmas 1966 to attend and present a paper at the East African Social Science conference in Nairobi and also to travel to other parts of the East coast, including re-visits to Kilwa Kisiwani and Zanzibar

The period between February and July was broken only twice by visits to Kilindoni. I no longer had the Land Rover, which I found a great relief, and although I discovered that it was possible to walk to Kironwe in two hours and then eventually get a lorry or truck to Kilindoni, I no longer felt the same need to escape from the village:

I find that the first couple of days of leaving the field I am intensely miserable trying to make the adjustments, and glad to get back afterwards, even though I had wanted to leave in the first place. (LC let)

I began at this period to keep a diary, which I did more or less regularly for the next year, just before my departure. I had intended to keep one earlier, but during the first period of field-work had felt just too bogged down, and had reassured myself with the thought that my frequent letters home England served as a form of diary. In fact, comparing the letters with the diary, it is surprising what different perspectives they offer. Letters of course were meant to be read by recipients, the diary by no one but myself. The letters are also part of a dialogue, for they answer other letters and invite replies. Much of their content is about future plans - especially for the summer when LC planned to come and visit for a month. Letters to my parents frequently discuss family affairs, those to LC affairs academic - scholarships, thesis-writing etc. The diary, on the other hand, focuses more or less exclusively on the village and on my own personal state, both physical and mental.

I continued to chew over the comments given to me by Wilfred Whiteley, who had made me think that I should broaden my research rather more. When the books which I had requested LC to send me arrived, I read *Purity and Danger* and some of Turner's work. I was both admiring and despairing as I went

through *Schism and Continuity*, wondering how he had managed to accumulate such detail¹⁶ (1).

I went to as many rituals as I could find, especially those of spirit possession, but I also attended a boys' circumcision ritual. As all of these were taped, I had to transcribe them at regular intervals. In a letter to LC I complained of how time-consuming this was but noted that:

However, it has shown me how fascinating this ritual business is. Until you go through it in detail like this, you only get a quarter. And they really let themselves go - sex, quarrels etc all come out in a way they never do otherwise.

Mostly it was the cook Salum who helped me with this, sometimes his wife Fatuma, and twice Salum and I went to Kilindoni to work undisturbed. If there were passages Salum could not understand, I asked Mohamed. The rituals were very difficult to transcribe as there was always a lot of background noise and a lot would be happening at once. Much of the language was esoteric - the cult of the sea spirits used a great deal of Arabic, those of the land spirits had a special vocabulary. Circumcision rituals for boys and puberty rituals for girls used words from several mainland languages - especially Kizaramo and Kingindo. In early March I wrote in my diary "I'm rather going off doing a land tenure-oriented study and am inclining to ritual" and a few days later that "The ritual is getting more exciting".

Nonetheless, I felt compelled to complete my survey of the fields, and by the end of March, I had almost finished it, much to my relief, as I had found it very exhausting. During the time I was away in Dar es Salaam, most people had moved out of the village to live in their fields for the remainder of the agricultural season. I attended weeding and transplanting parties, and walked miles, both to interview people who would not otherwise be available, or else to measure fields, which had to be done discreetly. The bush fields of Kanga village cover about 20 square miles, and there are also many acres of meadow land. In addition to the all the walking which this necessitated, I also visited fields in the neighbouring villages - Bweni (5 miles away), Banja (across a mangrove swamp and tidal creek), and Futa, a walk of one and a half hours. I also went twice to Kilindoni to transcribe tapes, which meant walking to Kirongwe, a journey of about two hours.

The weather was extremely hot at first, but soon the rains began; this cooled things down somewhat, but turned the paths into streams. I wrote to my parents:

This is not the easiest time of work - the fields as you know are miles away and the paths are little more than muddy streams now, so I plod along, either soaking wet, or covered in mud and boiling hot, carting water, notebook,

¹⁶ I did not realise at the time how tiny was the settlement which he studied, but I did note in a letter to LC that his wife had acted as unpaid assistant, and that 'it was all very well for you male anthropologists'.

umbrella, and raincoat, tripping over the half-covered roots, surrounded by flies and mosquitoes and wonder if I am quite mad to be doing this when I could be happily sitting in a London traffic jam! (M&D let 37)

I continued to join in with whatever work was being done - people were half amused, half surprised. Some promised me a share of the crop when the harvest came (and kept their word too). Many saw my participation in this way as doing real work for the first time since I had come. A frequent question began to be "Are you going to *work* (i.e. cultivate) today, or are you just going to walk around?"

Even so, my attempts at 'real' work were often symbolic - I noted in my diary that one day in June, when I had been to visit Mohamed's wife Mwahadia in her field hut, we went into the village together, as she was starting to move back to her house. I helped her carry some of her harvested rice - she gave me about 10 lb to carry while she herself took a load of around 50lb (Diary).

I had started a card index for all the men in the village, with basic census information on it - I now began one for the women too. I had a good assistant in the form of Mohammed Athman, nicknamed Mzee Nyembo, who was prepared to come and sit for long periods, and check or give information.

By May people were harvesting and eating better than they had done in the lean period just before. Rituals of all kinds were plentiful. The major one was the *ziara*¹⁷, an annual gathering of the followers of a particular Sheikh of one of the Sufi mystical orders (*tarika*) to practise *dhikiri* (singing and chanting) led by one of the senior officials of the branch. I attended committee meetings to plan the event, and then went the *ziara* itself, an all-night affair:

A wonderful atmosphere, chiefly due to the shawishi¹⁸ mkubwa, a real 'live wire'. Helped knead dough - not very good at it though.

In the last few weeks before my summer break, the rituals came so thick and fast I could not attend them all. The most important was the village *maulid*, which involved everyone in the village. This was an occasion for concerted action to demonstrate that Kanga village could organise such a large event as well as if not better than the other northern villages, whose residents were always invited. I offered to provide the costs of the cow for the feast, which went down very well. The ritual was held just outside my house which, on the night of the *maulid*, was crowded with women come to hear the singing.

The next day, July 19th, 1966, afflicted with an acute attack of conjunctivitis, I left the several village for weeks, to spend time travelling in Kenya and mainland Tanzania, and have a final brief holiday with my partner at Ras Mbisi plantation on the west coast of Mafia.

¹⁷ There were two *ziara* societies in Kanga village, each led by a different Sheikh. But both followed the Qadiriyya path (cf Caplan 1975).

¹⁸ There are four office holders in the *ziara* orders: *halifa*, *shawishi*, *mrishidi* and *aba*.

Pleasure and leisure

During this period of field-work, as I have said, I rarely felt the same need to escape physically from Kanga. I devised other means of shutting myself off from field-work. In my room, with Salum on guard to tell people that I was out or sleeping, I would read eclectically - I re-read my Jane Austen novels, and also Flaubert, Chekhov, George Eliot, Iris Murdoch and Chaucer. I had begun to receive the *New Statesman* and the *Guardian Weekly*, so that I kept in touch with what was happening in the world, albeit belatedly. I also read quite a lot of anthropology, particularly, as recommended by everyone, the works of Turner. I would also listen to the radio, almost entirely the BBC World Service. I heard news broadcasts and plays, sometimes a concert, and even sometimes Victor Silvester and his band.

My other means of 'escape' was to go to the beach, a 10 minute walk from my house:

Am sitting on one of my favourite places, Kanga beach, where there is a fallen tree whose trunk and branches make the most comfortable chaise-longue. After a long day - 6.45 a.m.- 4.15 p.m. today - I returned home muddy and sticky, and my head going round... Although it's now 5.30 it's very warm sitting here as my seat faces the sun. The tide is coming in underneath the tree and I've just had a swim in about two feet of water which was almost boiling hot. .. Whenever I have to 'get away' for a short time, I come down here, where it's usually deserted; after getting such a pile of letters the other day, I rushed off to re-read them." (LC 61)

I'm sitting on the beach now, watching a glorious sunset. You can literally see the sun plop into the sea, and a new moon has just appeared. (M&D 48)... Sometimes there is a canoe moored out in the bay, and I can sit in it and think in peace, away from both people and biting sand flies which infest the beach when there is no breeze.(M&D31)

But I did not always go to the beach alone - sometimes I went with Fatuma, the cook's wife, and Subira, her foster-daughter, then aged about six. We made a collection of shells, and Subira learned the joys of splashing round in the water. This is a pleasure denied to most children of her age, as the beach is not regarded as a place of recreation. Indeed, it is never visited by women unless they are collecting firewood, except on the day of the Swahili new year, when they perform the ritual which includes bathing in the sea. Men go to the beach for fishing, and young lads sometimes go to play or swim, but not frequently.

Another pleasure only very rarely indulged in was going out in one of the local boats:

Yesterday in spite of a slight temperature due to every sore on my body suddenly going septic, I went off lobster fishing with two fishermen here and had quite the most marvellous time - I'd forgotten the joys of goggling and sailing for

pleasure - so I know what I'll do next time I can't bear Kanga any more. (LC 95).

I sometimes went to the beach at night too, although usually in company:

Last night was a full moon, and I went off with two of my neighbour's children to the beach. We watched some of the fishing, and I went for a swim, returning home at midnight. The moonlight nights here are quite unbelievable, it is almost like sunlight, it's so bright. (M&D59, 3/7/66)

One frequent companion for moonlight walks was Mikidadi, an intelligent young boy of around twelve years who often visited me:

Mikidadi came - he said he felt like going for a walk - so we went off to the Ras. A lovely moonlit night - tide right out and we could hear cars in Kirongwe (eight miles to south) and see the light house at Mkumbi (ten miles to north).

Mikidadi was sent off to Zanzibar to school, and the night before he left, we had a last walk together:

I went to the beach to say goodbye to Mikidadi who left for Zanzibar early this morning. It was a lovely starlight night; in spite of a year here, I never get tired of looking at palm trees silhouetted against a night sky! (LC132)

Towards the end of this period, I ran out of reading material, confessing myself still unable to face the histories of the Spanish civil war and western philosophy; instead I read the Koran from cover to cover. Then I would play endless games of solitaire. I wrote to my parents and asked for a book of card games, which they duly sent me.

Not all of my card games were solitary, however. Next door to my house was one of the village shops where men would often gather in the evenings and would play cards or *bao*¹⁹. They tried to teach me their card games, but I was a slow learner. They, on the other hand, soon learned such games as rummy, and we often played together in the evenings. This was probably the time when I was most 'dug into' the village - parts of my diary are even written in Swahili. I continued to put on weight, in spite of all my running around. The villagers, delighted, told me that 'Kanga suited me'. Evenings were spent talking to friends and neighbours, sometimes having poetry readings, singing sessions or card games, or going for moonlit walks. During one memorable period, a group of neighbours and I spent long evenings sitting on the shop veranda reading Swahili poetry:

This week has been a strange mixture of feeling at times very contented here, and that altogether this is not an experience I would miss for anything.. The last three evenings I haven't gone to bed before midnight and last night it was 1.30 a.m... We had some poetry reciting session - doing this kind of thing makes me

¹⁹ A board game which is widespread on the coast of East Africa. Similar games exist throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa.

feel that I could stay here for ever, stars, palms and very pleasant company. (LC 96, May 1966)

Last night went to MM's house to collect books he had borrowed. On way back, started discussing poetry. Started to read, then Nyituki (a neighbour) brought his book, then Juma (the shopkeeper) read some.

Confidences

Although I did not realise it at the time, it was probably because I was increasingly able to relax in the village, and regard informants as friends as well as subjects that during this period, I began to be privy to a good deal of confidential information. Malim was my adopted 'brother', and spoke frankly of both his feelings and doings. Salum, particularly when Fatuma was not staying with us, sometimes regaled me with often hilarious tales of his sexual exploits. Mohamed was another who gave me his close confidences and I learned of his frequent adulteries.

In retrospect, I wonder why it was that I did not get many such confidences, or not in such detail, from women. One reason was that I had little opportunity to talk to women alone and undisturbed. Women visited during the day, when other people were always dropping in and out. They were often accompanied by children who needed attention if they were small, or had 'listening ears' if they were bigger. On one occasion, I decided to go and spend time with Mwahadia in her hut in the fields, so that we could have a long talk. I arrived soaked to the skin, and she lent me some dry clothes to change into.

Talked to Mwahadia, helped her with ukindu (raffia) etc. but didn't get chance to talk as much as I hoped - people kept coming and her children cry...

Women were not free to come out in the evening and talk before or after supper, a time for the exchanging of confidences. But scarcely an evening went by when I did not have male visitors:

Malim stayed until nearly 10 p.m. discussing Islamic history. He sometimes makes such penetrating remarks - one of the classic cases of the desert violet.

Malim had become my adopted 'brother', which gave me a whole set of kin relations, as he was the eldest of three brothers, all of whom were married with children of their own. He did not only come to talk - he wanted to learn English, he said, and I began to teach him. He had already taught himself to read and write Roman script. But he did also talk a great deal, not least about his relations with his first wife, which had become a major talking point in the village during the last few months of 1965 and the first ones of 1966. Malim had divorced her for allegedly having an affair with my neighbour the shopkeeper; she denied this although few believed her. He then decided that he was going to have a 'proper marriage' i.e. to marry a young girl, and I was a party to the complex negotiations for the hand of a young woman in Mrali village, culminating in the

engagement party at the beginning of April.

However, in the meantime, Malim had started a light-hearted affair with a distant cousin who had recently been divorced. Only a week after his engagement he brought her secretly to stay in his house for a few days and have, as he put it, a 'nice time'. The affair became more serious, and he came to tell me that he was planning to marry her and break his engagement to the Mrali girl.

Limitations

I thus seemed to be in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, I was being given confidences such as I had never expected to receive, and did not solicit. On the other, I was having to go to extraordinary lengths to collect the basic information which I thought I 'ought' to have. Thus in spite of the good relations I had with many people in Kanga, and the closeness to some of them, what I still thought of as 'proper' field-work sometimes remained difficult. In my second report to my supervisor, written at the end of March 1966, I note that:

People are terribly reluctant to divulge their genealogies in any sort of orderly fashion. The idea of an anthropologist sitting there with notebook and asking how many brothers a man's father had, and how many children they have just doesn't wash here. In fact getting down to details has provided the most difficult part of the work here - people are very reluctant to mention anything specific... this has to be done by casual questions... In spite of all efforts, many people, especially the women, are still convinced that I am a government employee.

I also relate that I felt myself to be frustrated by lack of clear-cut norms of behaviour of the kind I had expected to find.

There is no single norm in anything, not even ideally, so that the only valid norm is a statistical one

Phil's reply, almost as long as my report, was as usual, reassuring.

The longer you are there and the more data you collect, the more the situation will become complex and even obscure, in all probability. You'll never again have such a simple and clear picture again as you perhaps had after only a short time in the field.

He was, of course perfectly right - the more one 'knew', the more one realised how much more there was to know, and how little one knew already. Phil was sceptical of my contention that this was a society 'without norms'. He remarked that I should of course look for statistical norms but

Surely these people have some sort of expectations which can be called norms? Even in the most jungly of free enterprise societies people do have some expectations, however cynically they may express them... I think that you are tending to oversimplify if you say that ideal norms do not exist.

In his down to earth way, he went on to encourage me to collect as many case studies and disputes as I could since

An ounce of real concrete data will be worth a pound of ideal theorising, even if it is the folk-theorising of the people themselves.

In retrospect, I hear in this comment the reverberations of then current debates on ideal versus statistical norms, and perhaps even a presaging of what came to be called the 'emic-etic' distinction, that is between the analysis of society offered by the outside observer, and that made by the people themselves.

Another problem was in my focus on kinship and descent since my own anthropological education had prepared me to find nice neat descent groups, of the kind that Evans-Pritchard had reported for the Nuer, or Fortes for the Tallensi²⁰. Phil was convinced that such models were inapplicable to my data:

They almost certainly are not fixed corporate groups, so try to rid your mind of all the stuff on unilineal kin groups that you have imbibed in African anthropology.

LC too suggested that "the main point is to caution you about trying to set up an ideal structural arrangement of koo groups" if that was how the society was conceptualized. In retrospect, I took the advice of neither, proceeding to argue in my thesis that the *makoo* were descent groups, like any other.

Phil also asked me whether I could use the concept of action sets recently developed in his own work on the Ndendeuli and by Adrian Mayer (also in the SOAS department) and suggested I look out for 'mosque politics' of the kind currently being reported by another SOAS anthropologist, Abner Cohen.

Phil's letter concluded on an ambivalent note:

Anthropologically, this seems to have been something of a Levi-Strauss year and clearly his influence (pro or anti) seems to be growing.... Mendelson²¹ has again given us a couple of lectures on LS to try and explain the wonder of it all, but I rather think that he has not really succeeded, beyond convincing us that he (Mendelson) thinks that LS is the genius of our time. Well, sometime you too will have to come to grips with all this, and with Leach too; but to me, little or all the fussation seems to have anything to do with what you, for instance, are trying to do in the field.

I worked hard to try and finish the lists of coconut trees and their owners, the card indexes of basic information for each adult in the village, and to complete their genealogies. The amount of work to be done seemed endless, and I in

20 E. Evans-Pritchard, 1940. *The Nuer* The Clarendon Press, Oxford; M. Fortes and E. Evans-Pritchard, 1961. *African Political Systems*. International African Institute

21 Michael Mendelson was an anthropologist who lectured at SOAS, teaching me in my second year. He left to take up a position in the States, but later abandoned anthropology for poetry under the name of Nathaniel Tarn.

April I decided to postpone my return to England for a further three months, having already extended it to the end of 1966:

I have begun to think that there are certain people who will never be helpful or responsive, a minority who ruin one's day. At the moment I don't seem to be making any progress at all... it won't be long before another report is due, and I can't think what to put in it. I seem to have made little progress since the end of January. After an initially enthusiastic reception, I'm realising that the hardest part is getting specific information; even taking genealogies here is terribly difficult. (LC let 86)

To my parents I wrote that

It is really so difficult to explain clearly what I'm doing, especially to the women, and there are a few who still tell lies, or hide when I come, which is rather off-putting. In so many ways, there is such an unbridgeable gulf, and yet at other times, when sharing a joke or gossiping about nothing in particular, I feel they are good friends. (M&D let33)

By this time, I was clear that there were six cognatic descent groups in the village. Only a few elders, not more than one or two in each group, knew the genealogy of the whole group. The Imam of the mosque, who became an increasingly willing informant on many matters, was the first to say that he would give me the genealogy of his group - it took several days to take it all down. Subsequently, I was able to obtain the genealogies of four other groups, but the elder of the largest group refused to give me any information at all. However, I discovered that the brother of my informant Mohammed was a junior elder of this descent group, and had already been taught the genealogy. He agreed to come and 'give' it to me, in return for a financial consideration.

Finally cornered the man who is going to give me the biggest ukoo and we worked on it until 10 p.m. the other night, so now I'm trying to put it on to a master genealogy. Incidentally taking it down was like getting secret information in a spy thriller - we had the door closed, curtains drawn and Radio Cairo... going full blast to prevent the people sitting outside the shop next door from hearing. Due to finish it off on Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday I am going, also in dead secret, to measure some fields, which my informant considers to be 'safe' now that everyone has moved back into the village (LC let)

By this time, I had only six weeks left in the village before leaving to spend a month's holiday on the mainland. When I returned in mid August, I planned to spend only a short time in Kanga, and then move to another village further south. I thus had a sense of urgency about completing all the tasks I had set myself, especially finishing the census material and revising the list of coconut fields and their owners which I had obtained from the government agricultural office. In fact, some people still continued to give me incorrect information, although they were a small minority. I began to doubt the usefulness of collecting statistics at all

If you knew the underhand methods I have to use to get information of this kind... I'm quite convinced of the inaccuracy and uselessness of most surveys neatly presented in charts and percentages - people just don't tell the truth about so many things. (L.C. let 29/6/66)

I also started re-doing the map I had made of the village at the very beginning, and which I could now see was highly inaccurate. Mohamed helped me with this, and at his suggestion, we went around saying that we were 'looking for eggs to buy', as he was convinced that people would not like us making a map of the village.

My attempts to persuade the most important shaman that I should accompany him when he went to the spirit's cave (*panga*) to make the annual sacrifice proved useless - he continually procrastinated, until one day I heard that the sacrifice had been made without me.

Why were people so reluctant for me to know how big their fields were, or how many coconuts they owned? Partly because they saw themselves as being harassed by the government, and many remained convinced that I worked for the government, and so needed to protect themselves. But another worry was that other people would find out things which they did not wish them to know. In actual fact, there were very few aspects of village life which could be described as 'private', but the important thing was that people had to act as if they were. So giving information to an outsider, such as myself, one might risk being accused of telling other people's secrets.

In some instances, there were other reasons for secrecy. I had no inkling that my neighbour was planning a second marriage until I was invited to the wedding a couple of days beforehand. The reason for the secrecy was because he did not want his first wife to know his plans. I felt very sorry for her, since she appeared worn out by the ten children she had born him. (In fact, he was later to divorce the second wife, who had remained childless, but stayed married to the first at the time of his death during my visit in 1985.)

Sometimes information was denied me because of my age and status. Two weeks after my move to the southern village of Baleni the long-awaited girl's puberty ritual (*unyago*) was held in Kanga, and I went back to the village for two days and nights of intensive activity. This was organised by one of my best women informants, Mwaharusi Nyihaji²², for her youngest daughter Puta. Mwaharusi had given me copious details about the event beforehand and had promised that I should 'see everything'. However, the woman in charge of the ritual, who was an 'expert' from another village and who had never met me before, was not impressed. On learning that I was unmarried, she asked me sternly whether I had been initiated, as otherwise there were parts of the ritual I could not attend. I tried to explain to her that I had in fact been through the nearest equivalent I could think of (being received into membership of the Methodist church), but she refused to accept this as an equivalent and I was

²² There are several interviews recorded in 1985 and 1994 with her on this website

barred from 'going to the forest' with the women (cf Caplan 1976). By this time I had been two days and nights without sleep, trying to capture the ritual on tape, film and in my notebooks, and I was very upset. Mwaharusi Bt. Nyihaji tried to console me by promising that she would give me a detailed account of what had happened 'in the forest' later.

But there was another, very fundamental reason for not revealing to me all the information which I wanted. On one occasion I was watching some men build a fence in the fields, and one of them asked me to lend him some money. I was taken aback by such a request from a person I did not know well and tired of explaining that I was not a rich person who could subsidise half the village. I became annoyed, a rare event in the field, and refused the loan. Unperturbed he replied "But you will be rich one day. You will collect all this information, and go back and sell it; you will become a great teacher and make a lot of money." At the time, I paid little heed to what he said, but I have thought of this incident many times since, for it was one of the rare occasions when someone from the village articulated what many must have thought - that I was, in a sense, exploiting them.

Return to Kanga

I returned to Kanga at the end of August, and spent a couple of weeks there. I was amazed to discover that the villagers all thought that I had left the field to get married. I finally gave up trying to explain that LC and I had simply decided to get married at some later unspecified date and left matters as they stood.

Their misapprehensions regarding my marital status occasioned some initial problems. One of my favourite evening companions, the village joker, marched up to me in the street one day soon after my return and told me sternly to cover my head. When I looked at him in amazement, he went on "Don't you know you're someone's wife now?" In my diary I record that "This upset me because it is the first indication that they think of me as a woman at all." He and some of the other men who used to come and sit each evening in my house, regaling me with jokes, gossip and information, or reading poetry and playing cards, suddenly avoided coming. But after a short time, they drifted back. Even so, things were not quite the same again. I had come back to Kanga in a changed light - no longer seen as a young girl but as a married woman.

Much of my time on my return was taken up with working on the diaries which had been kept at my request by four men while I was away. I transcribed these texts, and went over them with the writers. Three, including that of the young Mikidadi, were relatively short, but Mohamed's diary proved lengthy and highly informative, and I asked him to continue keeping a diary for me.

In addition, there were still numerous happenings in the village which I felt obliged to attend. In a letter to LC, I record that "We are still in the thick of the ritual season and if I don't go it creates very bad feeling". I attended another circumcision ritual, and also the dance for the coming out of the boys. On this

occasion I stayed up until 3 a.m. and joined in the dancing myself, whereupon the musicians made up a song about me. It was great fun. I also continued to go to spirit possession rituals, in fact I record in a letter of 18th September that I went to three in a single week. On one occasion, I was dragged into the circle of dancers by one of the possessed men. This time I danced half-heartedly, and retired quickly.

People knew that I was going to be leaving soon. I had planned to spend two weeks in Banja village, and then move to Baleni village in central Mafia at the end of October in order to obtain some comparative data. In some ways, this made life problematic. People were disturbed by my comings and goings - they did not really understand why I wanted to go to other villages. Furthermore, I myself was becoming anxious to complete my field-work and return home, and this must have shown. I wrote in my diary of late September:

Mwahadia with rather surprising perspicacity said "You don't care to talk or do anything any more - all you want to do is get away". I hadn't realised that this showed so much! It's true that people have a different attitude since I came back - whether it's because I'm leaving soon or because they think I'm married? And my attitude has also changed - I no longer enjoy things or relax in the same way as I did (diary 2:7)

At the end of October 1966, the new agricultural season opened, and I was not invited by the elders and shamans to go to the opening ritual, although I had begged to be allowed. I knew that the chief elder, the one who had refused me his group's genealogy, was behind this situation. But I was also aware that feelings were running high in the village about the degree of government 'interference', as the villagers saw it, in their affairs.

Just as I was leaving the village, the Area Commissioner himself had arrived in the village with a tent, and done what he had long threatened to do - installed himself in residence until such time as the people cleared their coconut fields and finished building the house for the teacher. He also apparently campaigned against polygamy, divorce, marriage of young girls, and extravagant rituals, especially spirit possession. He asked the villagers to take him to the cave of a land spirit, but they found excuses. He became angry: "Why do you tell mama (PC) all these things, and she isn't even an African?" I was very concerned about the repercussions of all this activity on my field-work, and on my carefully nurtured relations with the villagers. When I saw him later, I asked him why he was wanting to visit a spirit shrine he looked embarrassed, and then made a joke of it - 'Just looking for tourist attractions' - and changed the subject.

On the other hand, some, feeling that I would soon be gone, were much more forthcoming with information. On my very last day in Kanga, my elderly neighbour and another man who was an expert in the boys' circumcision ritual came to my house and said that as a 'farewell present' they would 'give' me the information which they had withheld so far - namely they would sing the secret songs and riddles, and explain them to me. In the midst of packing, I sat with

these two old men who sang the songs into my tape-recorder and then explained their meaning. It was perhaps fortunate that the lorry which I had booked to come and move me to Baleni was two days late in coming, which enabled us to complete the work.

My third field-report was written in September 1966 when I was finishing off my work in Kanga village, and planning to move for a couple of weeks to Banja, a neighbouring northern village. By this time, I knew that my focus was equally on the relationship between land tenure and kinship, on the one hand, and spirit possession and witchcraft on the other. But I said little about the first two topics in the report, and Phil's reply indicated his unease that I seemed to be shifting ground. He urged me not to neglect kinship:

I'm sure it is a pervasive complex that penetrates into most other kinds of social action. I do very much want you to come back with some really solid stuff on the ukoo etc. so that you can sort out for us what coastal non-unilineal kinship is all about.

He again suggested that I start thinking in terms of network analysis and identifying 'action sets':

SOAS is full of action-sets these days as the result of my over-enthusiasm. Try if you can to rid your anthropological mind of the idea of corporate kin groups or finite bounded entities.. most Africanists cannot drag themselves from thinking in terms of groups...Conventional social anthropologists talk about a non-structured situation when they can't find a nice straightforward set of corporate groups and unambiguous roles. The situation is, I believe, merely structured in a different sort of way, and it is the preconception in the anthropologist's minds that prevents them seeing this.

In retrospect, I did not take his advice, proceeding to continue to collect statistics to 'prove' that the descent groups existed. I had been raised in a kind of anthropology which Leach once disparagingly termed 'butterfly collecting' in which classifying a society by its kinship system seemed to give the key to so much of its workings. I was excited by my finding that descent on Mafia did not fit the unilineal pattern - I too wanted my own butterfly, one that I had discovered myself. In a report for the University of London, which was funding my work, I stressed the positive aspects of my field-work, such as the 'path-breaking' discoveries I was making in terms of a kinship/descent system "quite different from anything previously recorded from Africa", and spirit possession, also "little recorded in the African context". In this way, I also sought to justify the necessity for the extension of my field-work in order to collect more data.

Comparisons: Banja and Baleni villages

In September 1966 I moved to spend a fortnight in the neighbouring village of Banja. I had visited the village on several occasions before, but I only knew a handful of people. However, within a couple of days of my arrival, I had an

invitation to a feast, where I contracted a severe case of food poisoning. Up to then, I had experienced only very minor bouts of stomach problems, and had not thought to bring much in the way of medicine with me. I had to return to Kanga, which I was not loath to do, in order to get some of the medicine I had left there. My neighbours were concerned - I sat in the shop next to my house drinking the ginger coffee they had made for me, feeling both unwell and depressed. Finally I retired to my bed, and read a Jane Austen novel for the nth time. The next day, feeling somewhat recovered, I went back to Banja.

Although I did attend some events in the village, talked to a number of its residents, and managed to fill a notebook, I spent much of my time there working in the house, which was too isolated to have many visitors. I tried, unsuccessfully, to write an article which I had been invited to contribute to *Tanganyika Notes and Records* and I finished up the Kanga genealogies. The informant for the longest genealogy came and spent some time with me, and we were this time able to work undisturbed, and complete it. So my two weeks in that village did not result in any comparative data, although it was useful in terms of completing outstanding tasks.

On my return to Kanga I was invaded by streams of visitors who came to welcome me back.

On getting back was so pleased and relieved. I feel safe in Kanga... plenty of visitors - Mohamed always makes me laugh

However, only a month later on Nov. 4th 1966, I left Kanga again, as scheduled, to move to Baleni, intending to stay there until I left the field in March. As the lorry was two days late, people hung around, waiting to say goodbye. When the lorry finally arrived on the fourth day:

It took only a short time to get packed up; as there were masses of helpers, then loads of goodbyes, but didn't feel sentimental until finally got onto back of lorry piled high, and (then saw)... Juma Kombo (Mikidadi's father) standing on the corner - then I really wanted to weep! (diary: 39).

I arrived in Baleni to find the house exactly as I'd left it a month earlier on a reconnaissance visit - no floors, no doors, no latrine. My landlord promised that all would be forthcoming immediately. In fact this was not the case, and after finally realising that he would not do anything about it, I sent for some Kanga friends to cement the floors, repaired the roof myself with Mohamed's help, and Salum's grandfather, a carpenter, made some doors.

Field-work here was an up and down process. I found Baleni extremely hot - the weather was in any case getting hotter, and there was no sea breeze here. I decided to divide my day into two, so as to return home for a siesta in the heat of the day. I had to do even more walking here than in Kanga, because the village was very dispersed, and found it more tiring because the paths were of soft yielding sand. After a few days in Baleni, I wrote optimistically to my parents:

There is plenty of interesting material, and the people so far responsive and friendly. Since I have 'relatives' in Kanga, they refer to me by the appropriate kinship terms - people who are quite unknown to me come up and claim me as 'husband's sister, or 'father's sister'. All very useful.

Not everyone was as welcoming however, and in some respects, it was much more difficult getting information in Baleni than in Kanga:

Giving any sort of information about other people is regarded as 'stealing' here, and people are so afraid of others finding out and then bewitching them. (LC let.)

A week later I was feeling even less sanguine:

15/11/66 I'm pretty worn out, as I have been on the go since 5.45am this morning - these days I get up at that hour to 'beat the sun' and normally return home at 11 a.m. to rest and work indoors until 3 p.m. Today there was a meeting, and then we all went off to look at a disputed field, and when I finally got home, there was a stream of visitors. Finally I've just had supper, and am planning to write letters and jump into bed... When I got back today I was really dehydrated, as I'd had nothing to drink the whole day - I did take a water bottle with me in the morning, but on opening it later, found lots of nasty little things in it - the result of keeping bottles too long in a fridge that doesn't work properly these days..

The distances here are really vast, and today I walked for nearly an hour to a group of houses I wanted to visit. When I finally got there I was feeling hot and fed up because I'd walked along thinking gloomily about how much I don't know about this area and how will I ever make any sense of it. However, at the house I went to I received such a warm welcome by a woman who has more cause than I do to feel sorry for herself. She has acute elephantiasis and pains in her legs, her husband has deserted her and one of her sons has gone off to the mainland and she doesn't know where he is; yesterday her field caught fire. For all that, she is cheerful, and walked half a mile with me to 'see me off', as they put it, and gave me some eggs.

One of the things I had wanted to learn more about was the form of witchcraft said to be practised in this area, but not in Kanga and the other northern villages. In fact, many Kangans had told me that it would be dangerous to live in Baleni, because 'there are so many witches (*wanga*) there'. On one occasion in Baleni, I was alone in the house at night. In fact I was already in bed. I heard a sound, and reached for my torch - it would not light. This was said by people to be a sure sign of the presence of a *mwanga*. I felt the hair on my scalp begin to prickle, and chided myself for being so silly. But I still had a poor night's sleep.

My response to leaving Kanga and staying in both Banja and Baleni was expressed through my body. In both places, I had bad bouts of stomach upset and lost a good deal of weight. In Baleni particularly, health problems were compounded by the intense heat away from the sea breeze and the vast distances I had to walk in this non-nucleated village.

In December, I went away from Mafia for a few weeks to visit other parts of the coast: I revisited Kilwa Kisiwani after an absence of four years, went to Zanzibar to see Mikidadi, and to Mombasa and Lamu to stay with friends from student days in London. My final port of call was Nairobi to attend a social science conference in Nairobi where I discovered that a number of other researchers were also working on spirit possession in East Africa. Thus encouraged, I returned to Baleni in mid January with only two more months of field-work before me and decided to concentrate upon spirit possession and witchcraft. Some of the rituals, such as the *kitanga*, were very similar to those I had witnessed in Kanga. But others were quite different, such as one called *mwakasia* where the participants became possessed by the rhythmic pulling on ropes.

In addition I continued my reading - I finished *Schism and Continuity* (Turner), and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. I also idly flipped through a book which I had acquired in my recent trip to Dar - *Swahili Prose Texts* by my old mentor Lyndon Harries²³.

Yesterday a chance remark to Salum about a text I'd found in Dar about spirit possession... revealed a whole new field of practices and ideas which had been right under my nose, and I'd missed them, and now that I'm really concentrating on this, it seems to be everywhere, and every illness and death is attributable to witchcraft and sorcery.. Salum's mother is being bewitched at the moment, so is my neighbour's mother, so I'm really in the thick of it (LC let 193).

All this apart, I was still having many visitors from Kanga, especially Mohamed, and sometimes Mwahadia, but others as well. I started to go through my Kanga notebooks, marking places which needed more elucidation and soon filled another notebook with 'addenda'. I also worked with Salum's wife Fatuma on the *unyago* material, about which I discovered she was an 'expert' who had herself conducted rituals.

Although I was doing my best to find out as much as possible about Baleni, I was still very tied to Kanga. People from there constantly came visiting, partly because of friendship, partly because my house, being near to the main road, was a convenient stopping-off point between Kilindoni and Kanga. On one occasion I record that I had an influx of Kanga visitors, and that Salum and I fed them and quietly starved ourselves, as there wasn't enough food to go round. Mohamed and Mwahadia visited regularly - Mohamed was continuing to keep a diary for me, so we transcribed and discussed this.

Looking back over my diary and letters written from Baleni, it seem as if I must have spent half of my time working on Kanga material. I confessed myself to feeling daunted by the sheer size of Baleni, by the heat and humidity, and the difficulty in getting around, and most of all, by my reluctance to start forming relationships all over again in the way that I had in Kanga; the first enthusiasm

23 V. Turner, 1957. *Schism and continuity in an African society: A study of Ndembu village life*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press; Mary Douglas, 1966, *Purity and Danger*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London; Lyndon Harries, 1966, *Swahili Prose Texts*, OUP: London and Nairobi.

was lacking, and by this time, I was anxious to get home. I did make some friends, I was given one *somo*. I did collect information - three fat notebooks testify to that. But I felt that I never had a complete picture of Baleni, that things always eluded me, that I would have needed much more time to get a full picture of this village.

In the middle of February, I packed up and went back to Kanga for 2 weeks to 'fill in gaps'. One of the things I wanted to do was investigate the mosque. I had been urged by my mentors from SOAS that 'mosque politics' were the 'in' thing, not surprising as Abner Cohen, then teaching at SOAS, had been reporting on his field-work in Arab border villages in Israel²⁴. But when I asked in Kanga if I could go into the mosque, hackles were suddenly raised, even though the mosque officials were among my best informants. I quickly dropped the idea and realised yet again, that there were always limits which one could not pass. Perhaps that thought made it easier to leave:

I'm afraid I didn't feel one little pang of regret to be leaving Kanga yesterday. And by the time I'd tramped the eight miles of mud and mangrove swamps to Kirgonwe, the thought of a London rush hour seemed quite pleasant

I did not keep a diary for the last month of my stay on Mafia - I was obviously very busy trying to finish everything, as well as packing and saying farewells. But in my last letter home, written from Dar, I note that "I am still terribly tense, can't sleep, can't relax."

Conclusion

In this chapter and the previous ones, I have given an account of my first field-work on Mafia Island. I have sought to show some of the pleasures and problems, the confidences and limitations. What only became obvious later was that as I began to take increasing pleasure in the village, and to form close personal relationships, so the data flowed in. In other words, most of the really good data came less from rushing round filling out census forms than from spending time talking to friends. Nonetheless, there were always limits beyond which I could not go - I could not see all of the girls' *unyago* because I was considered immature, I could not go into the mosque because I was a woman, I could not witness the sacrifices to the field spirits because I was a stranger who was identified with the government and so on. The reports from the field and replies to them by supervisors and others form a dialogue in which the anthropologist catalogues progress and problems, and receives reassurance and advice, some of which is taken, some ignored.

In these chapters, I also considered the reasons why I chose to focus my work as I did. Initially, I wanted to specialise in land tenure and kinship. This fitted in with the work I had already done for my master's degree, and seemed to be part of the kind of anthropology in which I had been trained; it was also a topic approved by my supervisor. Yet after spending only a short time in the field, I

24 Abner Cohen, 1965. *Arab Border Villages in Israel*. @MWBooks

was confronted with the drama of spirit possession, for which none of my training had prepared me. My acting supervisor urged me to work in this area, and I became aware that anthropology itself was becoming increasingly interested in religion and symbolism.

Nonetheless, I was powerfully influenced by Phil's urging to 'do kinship', and his lack of interest in spirit possession. In the end, both thesis and monograph largely concerned the former, rather than the latter topic.

With hindsight, I recognise that the conflict about which I should focus upon was not simply about topics, it was also about methodology. Studying land tenure and kinship was very much what my supervisor was fond of calling 'feet on the ground' anthropology. It involved measuring fields, taking histories of cultivation and so on. It could all be done very objectively even if not always very easily. Studying spirit possession, on the other hand, needed quite different methods - detailed exegesis of songs and rituals, ability to follow up and obtain complex case histories of illness, quarrels and death. It meant dealing with emotions and subjectivity.

Not only had my training ill prepared me for such a kind of work, indeed, with its stress upon objectivity and its shying away from anything that smacked of the psychological, it actively discouraged it. Furthermore, as a young woman of 23 who had experienced neither death nor illness at close hand at that time, I was ill prepared personally to tackle such issues. Such in fact, is the case with most young anthropologists on their first field trip.

Chapter Four. After fieldwork: Writing up

There are a variety of texts which emerge out of the field-work experience. Some social scientists speak of 'raw' data, by which they mean material which has not been processed. We might in fact, question whether such a category of material exists, given that even jottings in notebooks are there because of a process of formulation and conceptualisation, both by the anthropologists and by informants. However, it is possible to discern an increasing level of processing of material collected in the field - it is sorted, catalogued, indexed, typed-up, put on to cards (today into a database).

In my own case, the resolution to type up everything in my notebooks was not kept - there simply was not time in the field, and in writing this piece, I have deciphered and sorted for the first time some of the notes which I took over two decades ago. Inevitably, I 'read' it very differently than before. The index I constructed on my return from the field, for example, proved useless in the work I have been doing recently and has had to be re-done. All of this material, however, was for private, not public consumption. Only my partner and parents I would read my letters, only I my diary and notes. In this chapter, I consider writing for a wider audience.

First attempts at writing up:

While writing the reports from the field for my supervisors was not too problematic, this was not the case for articles which I tried to produce while still in the field. I was asked to contribute to the journal *Tanganyika Notes and Records*. Flattered to have been asked, I yet found it very difficult to know what to write about, finally settling on a descriptive account of rites of passage, which ultimately, was never revised or published. Perhaps I recognised that trying to publish an article at this stage, no matter how ethnographic, was rather premature.

Although the article was very tentative, at least it had been possible for me to begin to write something which I thought might be read by a wider audience than my supervisor and a few friends. This however was not the case when on my return to London I was asked by a friend working for the Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation to prepare a radio talk in Swahili on Mafia Island. On numerous occasions I sat down and tried to think what I would say, and each time I gave up in complete despair, although I had written short pieces in Swahili and broadcast them in the BBC World Service before going to the field. Those articles had been describing aspects of England to a foreign audience. But how was I to describe Tanzanians to themselves? How would a description of life in Kanga village, Mafia Island, appear to a mass radio audience in Tanzania? I imagined that other rural people would find it trite, banal, and boring, while urban dwellers, at least educated ones, might balk at descriptions of spirit possession rituals. With hindsight I realise now that what I had only sensed intuitively then was a huge contradiction in anthropology - one writes of 'the Other' to an audience which is not that Other, but composed of people who share one's own

culture, even if they are not professional anthropologists. The Others are interesting precisely because they are not ourselves - how then can we make them interesting to themselves?

Return to London and giving research seminar papers – an important rite of passage

It was the custom at the Department of Anthropology in SOAS for students returning from the field to present three field-work papers to an audience of their fellow postgraduates and staff. This event, much dreaded, was regarded as a significant rite of passage for the student. The basic idea was that it obliged the student to put her data into some sort of order as quickly as possible - the discussion at the seminar would pull this order to pieces, and, it was hoped, make useful suggestions which would enable the student to re-work the material.

In spite of my supervisor's urging to concentrate upon kinship, I called my series "The social context of spirit possession on the East African coast", and only the first background paper was concerned with kinship, descent and land tenure, while the second two focussed on spirit possession. Both were written with the recent work of Ioan Lewis very much in mind. I had already received a copy of his Malinowski Memorial lecture while I was in the field²⁵. In it he argued that such cults were most likely to concern the 'deprived' or 'marginal' such as women; his own fieldwork focused upon the *zar* and similar cults of north-east Africa.

I disagreed, arguing that Lewis' analysis did not fit the cult of the land spirits in Mafia because the 'most deprived' in the status hierarchy would be the descendants of slaves, and none of these was ever possessed. Furthermore, both men and women were possessed by land spirits, but only those with ancestry of a relationship with a spirit. The other major category of spirit possession cult in northern Mafia, that of the spirits of the sea, on the other hand, was not too dissimilar from the *zar* described by Lewis and others. On Mafia, the members of its guilds were almost entirely women, drawn from all descent groups and both ethnic categories, and the *zar* healing ritual focused on women's reproductive problems - sexual relations, fertility, childbirth. However, I was reluctant to see this as evidence of any 'deprivation' suffered by women:

In the discussion at the end of the last seminar paper, I was asked about the 'position of women', a topic which I was only just beginning to think about. My immediate reaction was to refuse to see women in Mafia as subordinate to men (indeed, the very word subordinate did not enter my vocabulary until some time later). Although I had given the matter little thought while in the field, when asked in Britain about the 'position of women' in Mafia, it seemed to me that I would be doing an injustice to the complex and often strong female characters I had known in the field by portraying them as 'deprived', 'marginal' or unequal to men.

²⁵ Ioan Lewis, 1966. 'Spirit possession and deprivation cults' *Man* (new series) vol. 1.

However, such questions interested most of the audience much less than did the fact that the cults involved the slaughter of either a black or a white cow, each spirit being associated with one or the other colour. Everyone, it seemed, had been reading the recent work of Victor Turner on Ndembu ritual, and was also becoming interested in binary oppositions.

Writing the thesis

Although the research seminar papers had focussed largely on spirit possession, in the end, the thesis was mainly about kinship and land tenure. Its title was *Non-unilineal kinship on Mafia Island, Tanzania* and in the abstract I stated that "the aim of the thesis is to see how individuals manipulate their membership of cognatic descent groups to maximize their advantages in various social contexts".

I was determined to show that in northern Mafia Island, there existed descent groups which were unrestricted either by sex (people belonged to the groups of both their mothers and their fathers) or by residence (they retained membership of groups even if they did not reside with them). This system raised the question of choice - what factors led people to affiliate with which groups in which contexts? And what was the link with marriage patterns, especially preferential cousin marriage, and with the high divorce rate?

The contexts in which descent group membership operated were residence, land tenure, Islamic observance, and spirit possession, and a chapter was devoted to each of these topics. I considered the statistical patterns of the choices that men made in each of these contexts:

The ideology of this society states that a man has equal rights in the descent groups of both his parents and that he thus has a right to reside with these descent groups.

It did not occur to me at that time to look at women's choices.

The situation in Kanga was complicated by the fact that so many villagers had membership of several descent groups. I therefore ended the thesis by considering the statistical patterns of choice in a plethora of tables. Somehow I felt that I was proving that such groups did exist, and they were functioning in 'real life', not just in terms of people's conceptualisations, or my own for that matter. For this, I was somewhat criticised by my external examiner, Joan Lewis, who pointed out that whereas I had begun with a deductive mechanical model, looking at the social structure, norms and ideology, I had ended up with an inductive, empirical, statistical model. The relationship between them was not entirely clear.

Nonetheless, the thesis was passed and recommended for publication. I did want to publish it as a monograph, but time was now running out - within six months of finishing it, I was to leave for Nepal with LC for another year of

fieldwork. I needed to read up on this new area, and learn Nepali, as well as dealing with practical details of travel to a remote area, and letting out our London house. Accordingly, I compromised, and wrote a summary of the thesis as an article which I sent to *Man*, on the advice of departmental staff, who said that this was a customary way of announcing one's arrival as a fully-fledged anthropologist. It appeared in September 1969²⁶, by which time I was already in the Far Western Hills of Nepal.

We spent a year in Nepal, leaving the UK in December 1968 and returning in January 1970. On my return, I found that I was pregnant, and worked assiduously to finish as much writing as possible before the baby arrived. Although I had originally thought that I would write up a long report on the Nepal data, and then get back to revising my Ph.D. thesis for publication, plans changed when I was offered a contract to produce a book on social change in West Nepal. This was irresistible, and so for the year after we returned from the field, I worked on the Nepal material - the book was published in 1972²⁷.

Meantime, I was again teaching part-time at Birkbeck College, and also at the newly created Open University. The baby arrived in September 1970, followed by a second child in 1972. The year after that was bounded by family responsibilities - for two small children, for a sick mother, and for infirm grandparents. The Mafia material had to wait.

From thesis to book- at last

By 1973, we were considering our next field research project. We had decided that it must be carried out in an area which was new to both of us and which offered reasonable medical facilities for small children. On our return from Nepal in 1970, we had spent a short time in Madras city in South India, and liked it very much. To make that the locus of our next field-work was not a difficult decision.

In the year before leaving for India, trying to cope with two small children and learn Tamil, I struggled with the re-writing of my thesis, and found it very difficult. The major reason was that my interests had shifted considerably. Non-unilineal kinship had seemed like quite an exciting topic in 1967-8, but by 1973, I was bored by it. I wanted to use some of my new-found feminist ideas in re-writing my Mafia material for publication. I could see that I had quite a lot of information on women in my notebooks, but I had not incorporated much of it into my thesis. On the other hand, given that I was due to go to the field in 1974, there was not enough time to do a total re-think of the thesis. It had already been accepted for publication and the best plan seemed to be to improve the existing version, and plan on doing some work on women on Mafia at a later date.

26 Caplan, A.P. 1969. 'Cognatic Descent Groups on Mafia Island', Tanzania. *Man* (new series) 4.

27 A.P. Caplan, 1972 *Priests and Cobblers: Social Change in a Hindu Village in Western Nepal*. Chandler, San Francisco republished Mandala Publications, Kathmandu 2007.

The book was published in 1975²⁸, while I was carrying out field-work in Madras. I was pleased that it was out at last, but felt guilty that it had taken so long, eight years after the completion of my field-work, even though there had been good reasons for the delay. The major changes from the thesis were mainly organisational. I re-ordered the material somewhat, and changed its framework to include a discussion of different types of models following the work of Barbara Ward, who at that time was also a member of the SOAS department, as well as that of Edmund Leach and Roger Keesing. Nonetheless, I soon became aware that in many ways, the book had 'missed the boat'. By the mid 1970s, fashions in anthropology, as in everything else, had changed substantially.

The reviews, as is usually the case, reveal quite as much about the predilections of the reviewer as they do about the book itself. John Beattie²⁹ appears to have liked the book, but found the theoretical sections superfluous:

The book would have been more intelligible to non-specialists if she had not felt it necessary, presumably out of respect for 'theory' with a capital T, to present them as an exercise in formal 'model-construction'.

Others expected the material to relate to existing literature on the coast. Both Beidelman³⁰ and Ranger³¹ insisted that, as I was writing about a coastal society, I must have missed the moiety-like divisions which they insisted characterize the area, although in fact these are not found on Mafia Island.

The majority of reviewers, however, were influenced by the new anthropological interest in symbology and several criticized the book for not writing enough about ritual. In the already cited review in *Anthropos*, Beidelman wrote that "We lack sufficient account of the quality of beliefs, values and everyday affairs", while in an otherwise favourable review in *African Affairs*, Jim Braine bemoaned the lack of detailed information on spirit possession, as did Terry Ranger in his review cited above.

It is thus perhaps not surprising that when I came to write more articles on Mafia Island, I chose to write on ritual, using Victor Turner's work on the Ndembu³² in order to analyse and compare the boys' circumcision and girls' puberty rituals³³. However, although well aware by 1974 that interest among many anthropologists was shifting away from a long preoccupation with the political and economic towards the religious and symbolic, I could not go along with the trend which

28 A.P. Caplan 1975 *Choice and Constraint in a Swahili Community: Property, Hierarchy and Cognatic Descent on the East African Coast* Oxford University Press/International African Institute

29 John Beattie, review in *Africa* 4. 1977

30 T. Beidelman, review in *Anthropos* 1977

31 T. Ranger review in Scottish Institute of Missionary Studies.

32 E.g. V. Turner, *The Ritual Process*

33 Caplan, 1976 "Boys' circumcision and girls' puberty rites among the Swahili of Mafia Island Tanzania" *Africa* 46, 1: 21-33

analysed ritual purely in terms of itself - it seemed to me that ritual had to relate to other material aspects of society too. It mattered who did what and why, quite as much as what was done.

Conclusion

This chapter raises the issue of selectivity in anthropological writing. Most ethnographers, no matter how clearly defined their topic before they start field-work, end up with a mass of disparate data in their notebooks. How do they decide what to write about? In my case, I was influenced by work that I had done before and was familiar with, and with the kind of anthropology in which I had been trained. This made it difficult to 'change tack' although I had done this to some extent in the field and gathered a great deal of information about spirit possession. However, I would have found it much harder to write a thesis about that than about land tenure, for two reasons. One was because there was still little comparative material available to serve as analytical model, apart from the recent work of Ioan Lewis. But the other was that studying spirit possession also involved subjectivity, empathy, the personal and the emotional. Not only had my training discouraged me from considering such topics, relegating them to the realm of 'psychology', but in addition I was not really mature enough, nor did I did have sufficient life experience, to do that. For this reason, I focussed largely on land tenure and kinship, and, in an effort to inject a theoretical framework in the final monograph, to model construction.

How particular work is received is also influenced by a number of factors - it may be a fashionable topic, which gains a lot of attention, or it may, as I felt had happened by the time my book was published, have been superseded by others. Most anthropologists take a long time to bring their projects to fruition. In this case, because of the intervention of other field-work elsewhere, as well as events in my own life-cycle, there was considerable delay, and by the time I came to turn the thesis into a book, both anthropology and I had changed.