

‘Contemporary Christian Responses to Nyakyusa Rituals: Chiefs, pastors, and purification’

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ABSTRACT

The religion of the Nyakyusa people of south-western Tanzania has been the subject of many anthropological and historical studies. Indeed the work of Monica Wilson is a classic account of a complex African religion and its adaptations to missionary Christianity. Wilson also describes the African initiated churches which sought to use Old Testament theology to reconcile Nyakyusa culture with Christianity. The aim of this thesis is to bring such studies up to date. Nyakyusa rituals and sacred sites have certainly declined in importance since Wilson wrote. Nevertheless some rituals and many ideas survive from Nyakyusa religion and continue to exist side by side with the Christian churches.

It was my intention to discover and describe rituals and idea which persist or have adapted; to describe the attitude of traditionalists, chiefs and clergy towards them; and to consider how best the Nyakyusa Protestant churches can respond to the human needs which these rituals embody. I take the position that neither wholesale acceptance nor wholesale repudiation of traditional religion is desirable. The churches themselves must find a way of fulfilling these needs which are peace, tranquillity, and purity especially that of the heart or mind, in the lives of the Nyakyusa Christian.

After an opening chapter where I review the copious literature on Nyakyusa religion and use it to establish a base-line for ritual practice, I take the major rituals of death and life in turn. In successive chapters I present the results of my interviews about these rituals with chiefs, Christian ministers and traditionalists. I then review what the Old Testament has to offer in terms of death and life rituals and conclude that the African initiated churches are mistaken to suppose that there is a congruity between OT practice and either Nyakyusa or Christian beliefs. Finally I propose ways in which the Protestant churches of Nyakyusa can develop an indigenous Christianity which fully meets the needs still expressed in popular attachment to traditional ritual.