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SOCIAL AND RITUAL LIFE
OF THE AMBO OF
NORTHERN RHODESIA

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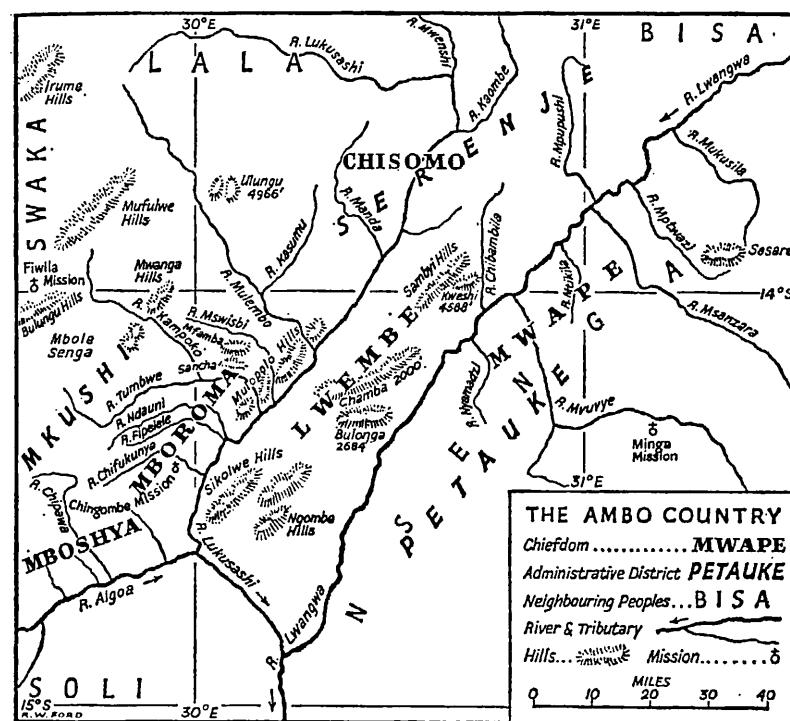
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The Ambo Country

In the judicial sphere cases 'of shedding blood in the land of the chief', *kuitila mulopa mu calo ca mfumu*, i.e. homicide, merited the chief's intervention. The chief is 'the owner of the land' or 'of the bush'. That is why the shades of the chiefs are approached to save the country from drought. Also the chief is figuratively called 'the land', *calo*, as in the acclamations in greeting the chief on arrival: 'the country has arrived', *calo cabwela*. As with other goods the chief gives land to the people, who are his 'children'. But when an Ambo says that his chief is the owner of the land, the meaning of this expression is that the chief could to some extent direct the use of the land. He could for example apportion land along a stream to a matrilineage, which could then exclude other people from using it whether for cultivation or for hunting. To the chief as controller of the use of the land, headmen have to report land requests, but for him to refuse one would be resented as an irresponsible and tyrannical act. Every Ambo has a right to a garden in his chief's country. It is the village which occupies a tract of land with the approval of the chief. The individual chooses land under the direction of the headman, and in consultation with the other members of the village.¹ If a garden, still usable, becomes vacant it is the headman who disposes of it to a newcomer. If an individual or a community wishes to cultivate in another chief's land, the petitioners have to ask permission of the chief to be allowed to use the land.

Ambo attitudes are liberal towards the use of the land for every inhabitant of the country. This rule is reflected in the proverb, 'they do not fight for the land', *musili tabalwila* (cf. Richards, 1939, p. 269, on the Bemba). In the distribution of garden sites the rule of equity is followed which is supplementary to the liberal use of land. Old people and old widows are granted land near the villages.

Prohibitions for the chief

The reigning chief had to observe certain prohibitions, and still does. He may not eat zebra or bushbuck as these animals resemble

¹ An interesting case occurred when a headman refused a garden to an outlaw, who was a chief's 'brother', accused of poisoning the chief. The guilt was not proven in the Administration's court, but the dying chief accused his 'brother' of the crime and public opinion accepted the accusation. The man was banished to Ambo country in the Congo, to Bukanda. This sentence of banishment was passed by a council of chiefs, who were all Nyendwa by clan like the outlaw. He defied the sentence and remained in the same area but was tolerated because the Administration took no action against the outlaw. Though the outlaw lives in a village of his own country, the headman fears the risk of formally accepting him into his village by allotting him a garden.

lepers. The spots and stripes are like leprous spots, and the hoofs are like lepers' limbs. It is feared that through contact with them the chief may be affected with these marks of a leper, which would be a great humiliation. The chief may not eat rhinoceros, because this animal behaves like a madman, attacking people on sight. It would be very undesirable for a chief to behave like a rhinoceros. The chief may not sit on the skin of a reedbuck. The reason for this prohibition is obscure and the explanations given are conflicting. One chief explained to me that reedbuck is an ingredient in magical medicine for turning a chief into a lion. Therefore the use of the skin is forbidden to him as incompatible with the medicine. However only one chief, Mboloma, is changed into a lion. Chief Mboloma himself may not cross the Mulembo river, because he will be carried across it as a corpse during his funeral rites. By crossing this river alive he may attract death. Mboloma could never go to Chikwashya's village, neither to Chilemba's, because Chikwashya is Mboloma's burier-priest and Chilemba is another funeral official. A chief must not come into contact with death or with those concerned with burials.

It is a characteristic feature of Ambo chieftainship that it lacks priestly character. The chief does not make offerings to the shades. The explanation given is that the chief is forbidden to approach chiefly graves. Offerings are made by the sons and grandsons of a chief, on his behalf.

Warfare

Methods of Ambo warfare have varied. In the years before European contact the main features of strategy were stockades (*malinga*, plur.). Before the appearance of the Ngoni, called *Mapunde* by the Ambo, stockades were either not built or had been discontinued for some time. This tradition may readily be accepted considering that after the final victory over Nkana Yarobe there was peace for a long time during Chilimba Nondo's, Mubanga's and, largely, Bwashi's reigns.

Stockades were constructed from logs, some twelve or more feet in length, sunk into the ground. This wall was strengthened by another wall of horizontally placed logs on the inner side of the stockade between the outer wall and uprights. The poles of the outer wall were fastened with bark rope to circular bonds after the pattern of the hut walls of poles. In front of the stockade was a