Chapter Seven

THE 'PEACE PUZZLE' IN UFIPA

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In communicating one spies, and is spied upon. — Fipa proverb

The problem I wish to consider may be formulated thus: Why is it that from the beginning of their recorded history the people inhabiting the Fipa plateau in southwest Tanzania have been described by a succession of observers of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds as remarkably peaceful and orderly? The problem is made more acute because of convincing evidence that Fipa territory was the site of endemic armed conflict between rival groups during a period that ended not long before European contact began in the later nineteenth century. What happened, and how?

The country of the Fipa, which is called Ufipa, mainly consists of a high and almost treeless plateau, flanked by the Lake Tanganyika shore on the west and the Rukwa valley and lake on the east. The whole territory covers more than 25,000 square miles and the present population is about 150,000, of whom about one-third are non-Fipa. In the late pre-colonial period with which we are principally concerned the population would have been considerably less, and probably numbered between 30,000 and 50,000.

The inhabitants of Ufipa are predominantly Bantu-speaking cultivators, with finger millet *(Eleusine corocana)* as the staple crop. Livestock, especially cattle, goats, sheep, chickens, and pigeons, are kept in considerable numbers. Possession of cattle is a mark of wealth and status, and in pre-colonial times is said to have been restricted to members of the royal dynasty called *Twa.* Hunting and trapping of small game, and fishing in the rivers and lakes, are and have been commonly practised.

The virtual absence of forest cover over most of the Fipa plateau

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has precluded the possibility of swidden or 'slash and burn' cultivation such as is the custom among the neighbouring peoples who inhabit lower-lying scrubland. Instead, the Fipa have developed a distinctive method of cultivation using compost mounds. The technique has the advantage of being vastly more efficient in economic terms than the swidden method, being more than six times as productive. An important consequence has been that Fipa villages are virtually sedentary and long-enduring, so making possible the culture of intense sociability here to be described.

Archaeological evidence shows that the territory of the Fipa has formed part of a wider network of regional economic exchange for many centuries. The plateau itself forms a natural corridor linking East and Central Africa. In the late pre-colonial period this geographically strategic position meant that Ufipa served as a junction and crossroads for the trans-continental trade routes channelling ivory, slaves, and manufactured goods. As well as participating in this lucrative trade, Ufipa produced and sold on both internal and external markets substantial quantities of ironwork, cotton cloth, woodcraft, grain, and dried fish. By reason therefore of both its superior agricultural technology and its advantageous geographical situation for participating in long-distance trade, late pre-colonial Ufipa was a good place to do business. Small wonder that the first European visitors remarked on the apparent prosperity, and evident industry, of the people. The English missionary E. C. Hore, who visited Ufipa in 1880, called it 'the land of plenty' (Hore 1880).

TROUBLE AND STRIFE

It had not always been thus. The copious oral-traditional histories of the Fipa record what seems to have been a long period, spanning many generations, of political conflict and warfare between two rival factions of the Twa dynasty who were both striving for domination of Ufipa's human and material resources. The oral chronicles vividly depict duplicity, murder, and devastation. A brief excerpt typifies the content of these narratives:

> Soon after the building of Ilembo there was a great famine in Lyangalile [one of the two indigenous states into which Ufipa became divided]. When the aKansi [the people of Nkansi, the

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other state] heard about this the king of Nkansi got an army together, including a great number of aTwa [members of the royal family], and told them: 'Go and strike them now, while they are weak with hunger!'

The aKansi thereupon invaded Lyangalile and began attacking the aLyangalile. But they did not know that the king Nguwa had brought back with him from Umambwe [a neighbouring country in which he had taken refuge from an earlier defeat] knowledge of the technique of using arrows in warfare. The aKansi began the battle by throwing their spears, and suddenly their bodies were pierced by arrows, which they were unable to extract. Not having encountered such a thing before, they fled in confusion. The fleeing aKansi were pursued by the aLyangalile, who slaughtered them in great numbers. (Willis 1981: 73)

What historical value can be ascribed to these narratives? Since not only the royal village of Ilembo but forty other abandoned village sites can be identified with villages mentioned in the oral narratives concerned with this period of war and disaster, it has seemed to me that the main pattern of events described in the oral traditions is likely to reflect a real historical process. It is also significant that all these ancient sites exhibit visible remains of having been surrounded by a circular earthworks which would have been surmounted by a defensive pallisade (*iliinga*). The historical process I have referred to culminated in the 1850s with the definitive establishment of twin Fipa states, Nkansi and Lyangalile. Notwithstanding their traditions of mutual hostility, these new states thereafter pursued policies of peace in relation both to each other and to the external world.

Certainly by 1880 the Fipa had acquired the reputation, as the Scots explorer Joseph Thomson put it, of being the most peaceable race in Central Africa (Thomson 1881 II: 221): '[They were] more of a purely agricultural race than any other tribe I have seen. To the cultivation of their fields they devote themselves entirely. They never engage in war, though they will, of course, defend themselves' (ibid.: 222). In the same year Hore, after noting that most Fipa villages had been fortified, observed that the pallisades had been allowed to fall into disrepair, and 'it looks as if the necessity for them was past' (Hore 1880).

With peace, there had evidently also come prosperity. Elsewhere, Hore refers to the 'many rich and populous villages' of the Fipa (Hore 1883: 18). He further describes Ufipa as

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a rich, well-wooded country, ruled over by an influential chief, Kapuufi [Kapuufi I, king of the territorially more extensive Fipa state of Nkansi] and a fairly complete organization of local subchiefs. The order and strength thus maintained, the natural advantages of the country, and busy energy of the people, secure a good measure of peace and prosperity to the Wafipa. (Hore 1892: 157)

The German explorer Paul Reichard, who also visited Ufipa in 1880 but seems not to have met either Thomson or Hore, none the less recorded essentially similar impressions of the country and the people: 'Ufipa possesses a tolerably well managed state, within the borders of which reign calm, peace and order. . . His [Kapuufi's] rule is generally, *energetic, but nevertheless mild'* (Reichard 1892: 400; emphasis added). The seeming contradiction in that last sentence of Reichard's *('Er führt überhaupt ein energisches, aber dennoch mildes Regiment')* hints at what we began by calling the 'peace puzzle' in Ufipa. How can a social regime be both 'mild' and 'energetic'? One senses a similar awareness of some underlying mystery in Thomson's statement that Kapuufi is looked up to as being 'not only nominally but practically the leader and chief of the people throughout the whole of Fipa. He is greatly respected and reverenced. He wields an actual power of government, so that his orders are respected everywhere' (Thomson 1881 II: 223).

Yet this orderliness and respectful obedience to higher authority also appeared to Thomson to have been achieved without resort by the indigenous state to overt repression. Thomson even gained the impression, which was almost certainly mistaken (the Twa states maintained official executioners), that capital punishment was unknown in Ufipa: 'The only punishments are flogging, fining and imprisonment. Adultery is punished by fines; murder by the culprit being tied for a certain period to a post, and all his goods confiscated' (Thomson 1881 II: 222). The same rather puzzling impression of uncoerced docility recurs in the mission reports of the Roman Catholic White Fathers, who entrenched themselves in Ufipa with the beginning of German colonial rule in 1890. The Fipa population of the Rukwa valley are described as 'gentle people, used to obeying their *powerful but pacific* kings of Kapuufi's dynasty' (*Chroniques Trimestrielles* n.d. 82: 233, emphasis added). The annual reports of the British colonial administration which succeeded German rule in 1919 (it is unfortunate that the German colonial reports appear to have

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been lost during the fighting in Ufipa in 1916) paint a similar picture of tranquillity. Violent crime appears to have been virtually absent among the people. An unmistakable note of boredom pervades this typical comment by a British district officer: '1938 has been marked by nothing especially noteworthy in Ufipa. The District has maintained its usual placid, even tenor, undisturbed by the outer world' (British Colonial Reports 1938 - 39 - 40). What sort of personality does this unusually peaceable society and culture produce? Here again there is a remarkable consistency and continuity in comments by outside observers and again a suggestion of a somewhat puzzling juxtaposition of qualities. The typical Fipa, it appears, is an engaging person, honest and cheerful of countenance, who loves to talk, especially with strangers; but he or she is also, it is repeatedly said, notably energetic and industrious. The English missionary Hore, who visited the Lake Tanganyika settlements of the Fipa in 1880, found the people not only prosperous and evidently hard-working (he noted 'vast fields' of various crops) but also surprisingly friendly and self-possessed: 'Here in Fipa more than anywhere else the people most wonderfully disguised their surprise on seeing me. One would think white men were as common as black among some whom I knew had never seen one before' (Hore 1880).

The Fipa, writes a missionary priest, are' *d'un esprit gai et causeur'* ('of a cheerful and talkative character', *Kala Mission Diary,* 1890). The Frenchman's comment is similar to that of an anonymous contributor (probably Paul Reichard) to the *Deutsche Kolonial Lexikon,* who reported the Fipa as being of agreeable appearance, 'goodhearted and outgoing' (*'gutmuttig und freiwillig'*) (Reichard 1919: 213).

To summarize the account so far, we have a picture of a people who in the middle of the nineteenth century emerged from a period of conflict and civil war to construct a peaceful, orderly, and prosperous society, the members of which consistently impressed visiting strangers as engagingly spirited, spontaneous, and outgoing. We must now consider how it was done.

POWERFUL AND PACIFIC

The people of late pre-colonial Ufipa, as we have already seen, were well placed to participate in and profit from the commercial boom that accompanied the beginnings of Western capitalist penetration into the African interior. Where other groups, like the Bemba or the

Nyamwezi, reacted to the new commercial opportunities by organizing war and slave-raiding, the Fipa devoted themselves to peaceful production and exchange. Instead of preying on their neighbours, they welcomed immigrants and visitors, especially foreign merchants, as Richard Burton had already reported in 1860 (Burton 1860: 153). Reichard reported that he and his caravan were not allowed to pay for anything during their visit in 1880, such was the honour the Fipa felt was due to a guest of their king Kapuufi (Reichard 1892: 400). Thomson also reports this custom, which he apparently found some-what puzzling: 'It appears that it is his [Kapuufi's] custom, when he takes a fancy to any trader, to empower him to levy whatever he wants from the different villages without payment; and curiously, this exaction is not resisted' (Thomson 1881: 229). Curious indeed, given the lack of overt repression which distinguished Kapuufi's 'energetic but mild' regime. But this seeming docility, and the uniform respect accorded to the indigenous government, become easier to understand when we know that in late pre-colonial Ufipa all the offices of govern-ment, with the exception of the kingship and a few other royal officiants, formed part of the same commercial network that animated the country and people as a whole, being perpetually open to the highest bidder according to a custom the Fipa called 'dissolving rank' (Willis 1981: 169-70). This hierarchy of biddable offices that includes civil and military governorships and a number of executive posts at the Twa royal court, and which is a system predominately run by wealthier male householders, is paralleled by a judicial and punitive system staffed by women. These female magistrates are explicitly concerned with the maintenance of public order at village level. It is their duty to repress what are called 'sexual' offences, a category which is broadly interpreted to include the public use of obscene language, and they are empowered to impose heavy fines on offenders. But powerful as they are, these female office-holders are still under the authority of the village headman, whose appointees they are. This dualistic but unequal structure replicates at the level of state organization a hierarchic dualism that relates the Twa dynasties, mythologically descended from intrusive stranger-women who were symbolically associated with Earth, to the aboriginal source of kingship in Ufipa, the ruler of Milansi, the 'Eternal Village' in the centre of the country, whose primal ancestor was a man who fell from the sky at the beginning of time.

This pervasive, cosmological image that juxtaposes Settler and

Stranger in a continuing relation of both polarity and hierarchic imbalance is also formally recurrent in the relation between the sedentary Fipa village community and the surrounding bush (domain of Nature, wildness, source of energy and incoming strangers) and the country itself, ever ready to welcome and incorporate people from outside. At the other extreme of social organization the fluid, competing Fipa kindreds whose changing memberships both crosscut village membership and link villages together, are polarized between relations through the wealth-providing senior males and relations through the incoming wives.

Finally, the Fipa concept of the 'person', *unntu,* provides a further instance of the cosmological image, being polarized between the 'head' *(unntwe),* associated with fixity, humanity, seniority, intellectual control and communication, sociability, superordination, and maleness, and the 'loins' *(unnsana),* associated with energy and movement, juniority, sexuality, animality and fertility, and femaleness. Overturning of this proper hierarchic relation between personal 'head' and 'loins' is associated with sickness and madness, with animality, with relapse into non-humanity (cf. Willis 1978b). We hypothesize, therefore, that it is the operation of this self-governing 'inner cosmos' that constitutes the Fipa person, which is reflected in the persistent observations of outsiders, suggesting that the Fipa are abnormally peaceful, docile, well behaved, and so on.

Moreover, the generalization of that cosmological model of the person to embrace the organization of the kindred (in which relations through males are called 'head' and relations through females 'loins'), the whole country in relation to the external world, and finally the intricate structure of governance, coincided, we suggest, with the transition from the period of conflict, destruction, and war to the regime of peace, order, and prosperity.

It may have occurred to the reader that I have thus far refrained from describing my own impressions of the Fipa, as a field anthropologist. Looking back on that experience, I certainly could not disagree with all those witnesses who have, during a period of 100 years, recorded descriptions of a peaceful and orderly society and an eminently 'sociable' people. Yet I would also find such labels irritatingly superficial in relation to what, in my memory, it actually felt like to live in and among that people. Yes, they *did* smile a lot, and lively talk was almost incessant during waking hours. During nearly two years' residence in Ufipa I never saw anyone fighting, even

children, except in play. But I fancy that I also must have smiled quite a bit, just as, I suspect, did Thomson, Hore, and Reichard and a succession of missionaries and colonial administrators, despite the stern implications of their respective callings.

Why can't I remember whether or not I smiled? Because it was my business, as I understood it, to make out what the Fipa were saying. Out of that continuing effort I was eventually able to construct an account of what I have here called the Fipa cosmology. Early in that endeavour my attention was drawn, by my Fipa friends, to the interesting fact that there was an apparent contradiction in the relation between the two fundamental principles of that cosmology, invoked at the social level by the terms Settler and Stranger, and in the domain of personhood, and also of kinship, and descent, by the terms Head and Loins. Strangerhood was powerful, bringing wealth, energy, increase, but only insofar as the Stranger, mythologically represented as an invasive woman, was incorporated into Fipa society under the pacific control of already established authority. This was a continuing process, by which Strangerhood was all the time being converted into Settlerhood.

Similarly, the 'energetic but mild' regime recorded by Reichard, and the 'pacific' and 'powerful' indigenous government remarked on by a missionary priest, mirror, in terms of political and social organization, the symbolic oppositions of Settler and Stranger, of Head and Loins, that Fipa describe as structuring their world. The same surprising 'fit' is apparent, at the personal level, between the contradictory yet complementary attributes of the polarized and hierarchic cosmology, and the relaxed, engaging, yet industrious people described in the documentary sources.

It seems to me that these two apparent facts, the uniformity in 'objective' descriptions of Fipa society and people delivered by different observers, and the formal similarity between that common description and the basic structure of Fipa cosmology is rather strong evidence for the innate intersubjectivity posited for the human species by Trevarthen and Logotheti (in this volume), and for the innate 'sociality' proposed by Carrithers (also in this volume).

'US' AND 'THEM'

A further, distinctive characteristic of Fipa culture became fully apparent to me only in discussion of this paper with Signe Howell,

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who asked me how the Fipa 'saw themselves'. I then realized that in fact 'the Fipa' do not see 'themselves' as an Us opposed to a Them, which is what the question implies. The term 'Fipa' as denoting the inhabitants of the Fipa plateau appears to have been a late nineteenth-century neologism invented by incoming Zanzibari traders. The root *-ipa* means 'cliff or 'escarpment' and refers to the geographical fact that the Fipa plateau is a raised block or *horst,* access to which requires, on three of its four' sides', a steep ascent of between 2,000 and 3,000 feet. The concept of 'the Fipa' as a solitary group distinct from other groups, invented by foreign traders, became institutionalized by two successive colonial administrations, German and British, and was inherited by the government of independent Tanganyika (now Tanzania). The term has also been employed, as convenient shorthand for 'inhabitants of the Fipa plateau and adjoining Tanganyika and Rukwa valleys', by this anthropologist.

In reality 'the Fipa', unless influenced by social-scientific ways of thought, rarely if ever talk about 'themselves' in such reifying terms. Nor does Fipa culture include a concept of a 'Self' at all similar to our modern idea of an atomistic human essence inherent in each individual, an idea which would seem to have emerged with the rise of the capitalist bourgeoisie in Europe. There is in the Fipa language a suffix *-kola,* applicable both to animate beings and to things, which conveys the meanings of specificity and particularity. But the distinctive characteristic of the human being or person, *unntu,* is definition in relation to others who participate in the same abstract quality of personhood or humanity (*uunntu*). This relative nature of the person is given ideological expression in numerous proverbial sayings (*imiluumbe*) which are primarily used to instruct children in Fipa cultural values. A quarter of the 200 proverbs I collected in Ufipa are of this kind. A typical example is 'Clever person, can't cut his/her own hair' (*'Unntu unnceenjesu, ataaipeele'*), the meaning of which is obvious. The same model of dynamic complementarity, this time in the domain of cognition, informs the Fipa proverb that stands as epigraph to this chapter: 'In communicating one spies, and is spied upon' (*'Amalaango yano yal' ukuneengula, ayali yali n'ukuneengulwa'*). And note the military metaphor used to characterize a pacific situation!

Personhood and selfhood are therefore, for Fipa, imbued with implications of a complementarity which formally resembles the pervasive cosmological dualism described earlier. This 'Self/Other'

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concept (as it might more accurately be termed) stands, moreover, in a relation of hierarchic superiority and inclusion to the analogous dis - tinction, and complementary opposition, of gender and sex. For not only are the dis tinctions of 'man' (*umoosi*) and 'woman' (*umwaanaci*) merged in the concept of 'person' (*unntu*), but every Fipa person, male or female, participates symbolically and equally in the complementarity of male and female attributes which is part of the cosmological dualism that unites bodily 'head' and 'loins' in dynamic and reciprocal opposition.

   Such being the case, it would seem logical to expect to find in Ufipa a measure of social equality between men and women, males and females, that is qualitatively distinct from that found in some other cultures where sex and gender differentiation serve as symbolic models for hostility towards the strange Other. And indeed, outside certain ritual contexts in which organized female violence against males was (formerly) institutionalized (Willis 1980), social relations between the sexes in Ufipa appear in comparative perspective as remarkably egalitarian. Of particular note is the Fipa custom of male -female commensality, the twice-daily sharing of food and conversation between males and females, including adults. Such commensality, of which Robertson Smith was the first to note the implications of equality and comradeship, is most unusual in Africa, where sexual segregation at meals is the general rule (see Goody 1982: 86; and Willis, in press). A similarly atypical instance is the playing by and between members of both sexes in Ufipa of the boardgame *isuumbi,* a variant of the well-known *mancala* game, which elsewhere in Africa is the prerogative of one sex only, most usually males (Willis 1983).

   The behavioural norms observed by properly socialized Fipa accentuate the social skills of oral communication and agreeable self-presentation. The cultural preoccupation with the exchange of words is evidenced in the existence of at least sixty verbs referring to different ways of talking and speaking. To possess *ufukusu,* good and — above all — pleasing manners is the most prized social quality. Conversely, the overt expression of socially unpleasing emotions such as anger and hatred and, *a fortiori,* the use of physical violence between persons, are rigidly suppressed by the Fipa. The cultural climate so engendered is not one that lends itself to the construction of 'Us/Them' social oppositions.

   Such a cultural climate is not easy for us to understand, doubly

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conditioned as we are by the objectifying language of social science and the confrontational rhetoric of nation-statehood. But the evidence suggests that these people did manage to transform their society from one riven by division and violent conflict to one that combined energy and order into a novel and enigmatic balance.

I would now like to return to the 'problem' posed at the beginning of this chapter, of how a society, that suffered from conflict and violence, was able to transform itself, during what appears to have been a remarkably short period of time, into a seeming paragon of peace and prosperity. Part of the answer has already been outlined. In terms of the economic, technological, and social environment of mid-nineteenth-century Ufipa, repression of personal and collective violence and channelling of human energies into productive action suddenly 'made sense' for a people newly provided, in the structures of indigenous statehood, with the political means of activating and enforcing a collective will. Constructed out of the exigencies of factional conflict and civil war, the new states were also moulded, with their opposed and complementary 'male' and 'female' administrative systems, in the image of the pervasive dualist cosmology that constituted the principles of peace and order in control of energy.

But part of the 'puzzle' presented to us, as observers and interpreters of a change from bellicose to pacific, might well be an artifact of our own categories. Our use of the term 'aggression' to denote behaviour that is inherently, and often actually, violent and destructive and always morally 'bad', a usage recently reinforced by sociobiological theory, is symptomatic of a dichotomy that may be peculiar to our own worldview. As Erich Fromm reminds us, the word 'aggression' is derived from Latin terms meaning 'to move towards' (Fromm 1973). In its original sense, therefore, 'to aggress' may equally well imply welcoming, friendly, and constructive behaviour as hostile and destructive. The use we have come to make of the basically neutral term 'aggression' is part of a complex of attitudes ingrained in our existing Western value system, that equates 'peace' and 'non-violence' with spineless passivity.

Viewed through the lens of that value system, it is difficult to understand how a people so evidently peaceful and orderly could also be not only energetic but also, as I learned during fieldwork, passionately competitive (Willis 1981, 1985). But if, modifying our simplistic and absolutist use of the term, we admit that human 'aggression' may manifest equally in the form of affiliative, constructive, and 'peaceful'

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action, as it may also be destructive and warlike, the 'peace puzzle' in Ufipa becomes less puzzling. For not only can we more easily comprehend the 'peaceful' society that first came into being more than a century ago, we can also envisage the transition from 'war' to 'peace', not as a contrast of incompatible conditions, but as a rather less fundamental change: from a state of 'negative' to one of 'positive' aggression.

We need not suppose that the emotional experience of anger, of hatred and of violence is absent from this latterly 'peaceful' Fipa society, despite lack of overt expression. One indicator that such negative emotions do indeed flourish is the prevalence of fears and rumours centred on witchcraft and 'poisoning' (Willis 1968). And another is the commonly told traditional stories *(ifilaayi),* which are replete with incidents involving treachery, cruelty, and murder, often arbitrary and unmotivated. These stories provide good evidence that Fipa, like ourselves, enjoy committing in fantasy acts they would never think of perpetrating in actuality. In the perspicacious observation of the moral philosopher Mary Midgley:

> There are not (as used to be supposed) any non-aggressive human societies. Opposition is an essential element in human life: aggression is part of the emotional equipment for making it work. Societies which keep it within reasonable bounds (unlike our own) are doing something much harder and more interesting than merely never feeling it in the first place (1984: 92).

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