

# Social Stratification in the Southern Lake Malawi Area During the Proto-Historic Period: Evidence From Burial Sites

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## Abstract

Iron Age research in the southern Lake Malawi area has concentrated on describing pottery. This has led to the establishment of an Iron Age pottery sequence which has been confirmed by carbon-14 dates. The present research attempts to do something different. Following the thorough re-examination of material and data from two major archaeological sites in the area, the paper reconstructs the socio-economic and cultural dynamics that led to the emergence of what appears to be an affluent society with observable social distinctions. It concludes that geography, the presence of abundant natural resources and the creativity of the people themselves were responsible for the emergence of such a society whose descendants continue to flourish to day.

## Introduction

When the Scottish missionary explorer Dr. David Livingstone arrived in Malawi in 1859, Malawians were still leading an Iron Age way of life. Livingstone was however, impressed with the affluence of the people who lived on the three highlands and the southern Lake Malawi area. He felt that the people were prosperous and very skilled in the economic activities they undertook. They grew in great abundance such crops as cotton and maize. They were good at smelting iron and making their own metal tools. They also made their own cloth from locally grown cotton. Livingstone also noticed that some of the people wore European made glass beads suggesting that they had contact with people who had contact with European merchants (Livingstone, D and C., 1865: 110-112)

But how far back can this prosperity be traced and what were the underlying cultural dynamics? Possibly of archaeological significance are two proto-historic burial sites in the southern Lake Malawi area are key to answering this question. The two sites are Nduzi Bay. Excavated by Ray Inskip and Mmemankhokwe 1 excavated by Yusuf Juwayeyi (Inskip, 1965; Juwayeyi, 1991).

## The Finds

At Nduzi Bay Inskip examined 12 burials some of which were directly associated with burial goods. At Mmemankhokwe 1, Juwayeyi recovered six burials with their associated burial goods. Most of the burials were adorned with glass beads. The bulk of the burial goods consisted of pottery and iron implements. Some of the metal objects at Nduzi bay had cloth and had metal points on them. At Mmemankhokwe 1, One burial, that of a female, had eight pots in her grave one of which contained a pre-cooked whole chicken and another, a pre-cooked whole fish. Another burial at the same site was associated with a large ceremonial spear and an ivory bangle (Juwayeyi, 1991: 33). These two individuals must have had spiritual and political power respectively. At both sites, most burials had on them quantities of glass beads and some at Mmemankhokwe 1 had beads made from a type of stone. At Nduzi bay, shell and copper beads were also found as well as cowries and remains of a hand held piano locally called *Kalamba*.

## The Pottery

At Mmemankhokwe 1, a lot of the pottery directly associated with burials was recovered while. Where broken pottery was recovered, much of it was reconstructed to between 80% and 100% completion.

The pottery is of two types. There is the regular pottery which Inskip called coarse pottery (Inskip, 1965: 13). This pottery was regularly used for cooking, storage and other domestic activities. Then there was the very fine red and black burnished pottery which he called the "best china" (Inskip, 1965: 11). This pottery was elaborately painted both inside and outside and from the rim to the base. It was made apparently more for its aesthetic than utility value. At Mmemankhokwe 1, there was no evidence of any domestic usage of the pottery. However, ethnographic observations of rural women in southern Malawi suggests that the larger versions of these pots were used for carrying water from wells to homes. There are no ethnographic observations for the smaller versions. Their shapes and sizes however, would suggest that they may have been used as dinner plates. These uses ensured that the aesthetic value of the pots was noticed and appreciated. At Nduzi bay, Inskip also recovered imported china porcelain and remains of a china beer mug (Inskip, 1965: 17).



Red and black burnished pottery

## Other Finds

Other finds at Nduzi bay included copper bangles used as ornaments and spindle whorls for use in cotton weaving. The copper bangles must have been imported as there are no copper deposits in Malawi.



Coarse pottery

## The Iron Implements

The iron implements included agricultural and hunting tools such as axes, arrowheads, spears and harpoons. There were also iron bangles which were used as ornaments.

## Beads

European made imported glass beads were preferred to local beads which at Mmemankhokwe 1 were made of a type of stone. It is possible the local beads were difficult to make and therefore were more expensive than the imported ones. The European made beads have helped date the two sites to between the 18th and early 19th centuries AD.

## Conclusion

The geographic location of the area made it a natural crossroads for traders and travelers between the Highlands and the East African coast. The area benefited economically from these interactions. The environment was suitable for successful agriculture. Although the raising of livestock does not appear to have been an important economic activity, animal protein was readily obtained through hunting and fishing. Local trade in locally produced items such as cloth and iron implements was an important activity. This trade was regulated by political and spiritual control by political and spiritual elite. The economic control of the cultural realm was in the hands of local merchants and artisans who produced the goods for both local consumption and export to other areas. At these levels of society worked together to create the prosperity that so impressed Livingstone.

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