REVIEWS

Beyond the Mountains of the Moon
The Lives of Four Africans,

Children of Their Fathers: Growing Up Among the Ngoni of Nyasaland, by Magaret Read.

Reviewed by WILLIAM J. SAMARIN

Beyond the Mountains of the Moon, by Edward H. Winter, and Children of Their Fathers, by Margaret Read, have one thing in common: they seek to describe the lives of Africans with the least possible interpretation.

Winter’s book achieves this goal best because his approach is autobiographical. He has let four Ambas, two men and two women from the western part of Uganda, tell their own stories. One chapter of the book is even devoted to a diary kept at the suggestion of the author from March to October, 1951. There is an introduction which is adequate and a short concluding chapter in which Winter seeks to demonstrate how personal documents like the ones he has used help in understanding social structure.

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The autobiographies are life-histories. It would seem that each informant was left to himself to choose what to include in his story. As a result, some of the material is pretty trivial; the reading is not always fascinating. (It would have helped the reader to have had some section headings). There are, however, many poignant passages, especially because they are told so simply.

Children of Their Fathers, by Margaret Read, based on the author’s three and a half years among the Ngoni in what is now Malawi, is a fairly straightforward account of how a child becomes a part of the society. The emphasis in this book is on child training (called socialization), for this is what the author is most interested in. In fact, the book is meant primarily for young parents and young teachers. It was written out of her conviction that the “anthropological approach” was necessary in the training of teachers. She states that she had spent over twenty years lecturing on how an anthropologist approaches the study of education.

It might be unfair to compare this book with another “growing up” book by an anthropologist with a similar name (Margaret Mead), but this one suffers in the comparison in not being imaginatively written. (One of the things that upset me most was the way Read uses the past tense which makes her sound like a traveler returned from a voyage: “The senior
herdboys... carried considerable responsibilities for the herds under their care...”)

These two books serve one purpose well: they provide an understanding of African culture through human beings. This is what a missionary is concerned with. He wants to gain insight into the behavior of the people he works with. He needs the rather abstract anthropological approach, for culture is indeed a complex thing. But he needs to see culture influencing or determining behavior. Books such as these will convince the average missionary that he knows his people less than he thinks he does.