

# BANYORO

The Banyoro live in western Uganda to the east of Albert they inhabit the present districts of Hoima, Masindi, Kibaale, Buliisa and Kiryandongo. They speak a Bantu language and their origins, like other Bantu can be traced to the Congo region. The Banyoro lived in scattered settlements in the populated parts of their country and their homesteads were rarely more than shouting distance from one another. Politically, they were organized under a King (Omukama).

## 1. NAMING

A few months after a child was born, three months for a boy and four months for a girl, a simple ceremony would be held at which the child was given a personal name along with one of the traditional Mpako names. The name could be given by a parent, grand-parent or some other relative. But if the father of the child was known and present, he had the last word. The names given differed considerably. A few of them were family names handed down in particular clans to commemorate, for example, a relative or some feature on the child or some circumstances surrounding the child's birth.

There were special names for twins and those immediately following them. However, the majority of other names portrayed the state of mind of the persons who gave them. Most names were real words which were used in every day speech. The general theme of the names rotated around the constant imminence of sorrow or death, the experience or anticipation of poverty and misfortune and the spite or hatred of one's neighbour's.

The names which related to sorrow and death include: Tubuhwaire, Bulewenda, Buliarwaki, Kabwijmu, Alijunaki, Tibanagwa and several others.

The names associated with poverty include: Bikanga, Baligenda, Babyenda, Bagamba etc.

The names intended to portray the spite of neighbours included: Itima, Tindyebwa, Nyendwoha, Nsekanabo, Ndyanabo, Tibaijuka, and many others.

Almost all the names portray that there were three things which the Banyoro feared very much, namely; death, sorrow and poverty.

## 2. GREETING

The Batooro used pet names empako when greeting one another. These pet names are said to be of Luo origin and there are eleven in all. There are twelve if the word okali is included but it is not empako in the real sense. The real empako are; Abwoli, Adyeli, Araali, Akiiki, Atwooki, Abwoki, Apuuli, Bala, Acaali, Atenyi and Amooti.

When people who are related greet each other, the young sits on the elder's lap. Among the Babiito, the young would also touch the elder's forehead and chin with their right hand fingers. After the greeting, coffee berries specially kept for visitors would be brought and presented in a small basket for chewing. Hereafter, a tobacco pipe would be offered with tobacco for smoking.

## 3. GREETING THE OMUKAMA (KING)

The King was not greeted in the same way as ordinary people were greeted. Whenever he was in his residence, the King would sit in an advertised place for certain specified hours so that any of his subjects could go and see him. This practice of going to see the King was called okurata. Whenever the people went to see the King, they followed certain procedures and used a different language addressing him.

There were more than twenty different ways of addressing the King at different times of the day. The King was not expected to reply to these greetings verbally, and he did not. Normally, in addressing the King, the third person singular was used. In fact nearly all verbs and nouns used to address the King were different from those that were used to address common men. However, women could kneel down and greet the King in the normal way and he would answer their greetings verbally.

## 4. MARRIAGE

The Banyoro were polygamous whenever they could afford it. Bride wealth was not so much of a prerequisite as it was in most societies of Uganda. In most instances, bride wealth could be paid later. Marriages were very unstable, divorce was frequent and there were many informal unions. In almost all cases, the survival of a marriage was not guaranteed. Payment of Bride wealth was usually done after some level of stability in the marriage had been achieved. Often this would be after several years of marriage.

Traditionally, looking for a suitable partner was a matter involving the family of the boy and that of the prospective bride. The girl's contribution to the whole processes amounted to nothing more than giving her consent. The first step was like it is today; a mutual attraction between the girl and the boy with a sexual relationship readily entered into. This was followed by establishment of a domestic arrangement. Formalization of payment, if any, would normally follow but would not precede these arrangements. There was a tendency for boys to find girls from the same locality. In fact few would look for wives from beyond their villages.

## 5. DEATH

The Banyoro fear death very much. Death was usually attributed to sorcerers, ghosts and other malevolent non-human agents. In some contexts, death was thought to be caused by the actions of bad neighbour's. People were believed to be affected or harmed by gossip and slander. The Banyoro provide a vast range of magical and semi-magical means of injuring and even killing others. Indeed, many deaths were attributed to the act of sorcery by ill-wishers.

The Banyoro viewed death as a real being, like a person. Whenever a person died, old women of the household would close his eyes, shave his hair and beard, trim the fingernails and clean and wash the whole corpse. The body was left to remain in the house for a day or two with its face uncovered. The women and children were allowed to weep loudly but the men were not supposed to do so.

Whenever the head of a household died, some grains of millet mixed with *simsim*\* were placed in his right hand. This mixture was known as *ensigosigo*. Each of the dead man's children was required to take in his lips a small quantity of the mixture from the dead man's hand and eat it.

The body was wrapped in bark cloth, the number of backcloths depending on the wealth of the dead man. The following rites were performed by one of his nephews. The sister's son had to wrench out the central pole of the house and throw it into the middle of the compound. He would also take out the dead man's eating basket (*endiuro*) and his bow. The fire in the centre of the house was extinguished. There would be no fire for cooking in the house for the first three days of mourning.

A banana plant from the household's plantation with fruit on it was also brought and added to the heap of the dead man's utensils in the compound. Then the dead man's nephew or son would go to the well and bring some water in one household's water pot by throwing it down among the heap of the dead man's utensils. He had also to catch and kill the dead man's cock to prevent it from crowing. The chief bull's testicles were also ligatured at once to prevent it from engaging in any mating activity during the time of mourning. This bull would be slaughtered after four days and eaten. This act of killing male animals was known as *mugabuzi*. The ceremony of killing and eating the main bull after four days concluded the period of mourning. The dead man's house would not be lived in again.

## 6. BURIAL

In Bunyoro, burial would take place either in the morning or in the afternoon but not in the middle of the day. It was considered dangerous for the sun to shine directly on the grave. If the dead body was for a man, the last cloth on the corpse was wrapped around it in front of the house, in the doorway. If it was for a woman, all this would be done inside the house.

When the body was being taken to the grave, women were required to moderate their weeping. At the grave, there would be no weeping. A pregnant woman was not supposed to attend the burial in the belief that she would miscarry. The body of a man was laid on its right side, that of a woman on its left. These positions were correspondingly considered to be the appropriate ones to adopt when sleeping. In all cases, the head was placed towards the east and nobody was supposed to leave the graveyard before the burial was completed.

Before the burial took place, the grave was guarded otherwise it might demand another person. Should a grave be dug prematurely, and the supposedly dying person recovered, a banana plant was cut and buried in the grave.

After all the burials, the tools used to dig the grave and the basket used to carry the soil were left by the graveside. People would wash themselves thoroughly and remove all the soil for it was believed that if one walked in a garden with the soil on, all the crops would wither and rot.

After burial, people would cut hair from the back and front of their heads and throw it on the grave. The grave was marked with stones and iron rods for it was believed that if one built over a grave, all the members of his household might fall sick and die.

If a person died with grudges against anyone, in the family, his mouth and anus would be stuffed with clay. This was meant the ghost from coming out of the corpse to haunt those with whom the dead person had a grudge. If the dead person was the head of the household, the grave digger would perform another ritual in which he would take a handful of a juicy plant and squeeze it with soot in his hands so that the juice ran down from his hands and elbow. The children of the dead man were required to drink this juice from the elbow of the grave digger. On the day of the burial, of the head of a household, a lot of firewood was placed in the middle of the compound. The children of the dead man would sit around it in turns. The grave digger would then tap each of the children on the side of the head with a large food basket. A small amount of hair from the part tapped was cut off and thrown away.

## 7. POLITICAL SETUP

The Banyoro had a centralized system of Government. At the top of the political leadership was the King (Omukama). His position was hereditary. He was the most important person in the kingdom. He was assisted in administrative matters by the provincial chiefs and a council of notables. The King was the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and each provincial chief was the commander of a military detachment stationed in his province. The King was assisted by a council of advisors known as the Bajwara Nkondo (wearers of crowns made from monkey skins).

There was a kind of political school in Mwenge; all the chiefs had to pass through it. Each chief had to send his favourite son to the King's court as a sign of allegiance. Leadership was not confined to men; the Kogire and Nyakauma rulers of Busongora were women. Other persons of political importance in the Kingdom were the Bamuroga (Prime minister) and Nyakoba (a physician of the Basuli clan), Kasoira Nyamumara of the Batwairi clan and a leading Mubitto.

Bunyoro as a Kingdom was initially bigger than the present district of Hoima, Masindi and Kibale. The legendary Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara from which the Kingdom of Bunyoro emerged is said to have been a very big empire comprising the whole of present Western Uganda, eastern Zaire, western Kenya and parts of northern Tanzania. This Bunyoro-Kitara was founded by the Bachwezi. It is supposed to have collapsed at the advent of the Luo. The Bito Luo are said to have established the Babiito dynasty over some of the remains of the Bachwezi state.

The Babiito Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara is said to have included present Hoima, Masindi, Mubende, Toro, Busigira, Bwera, Buddu, Buhweju, Kitagwenda and was sovereign over some parts of Busoga. However,

over time, the Kingdom of Bunyoro-Kitara started to shrink. Due to frequent succession disputes, it became weak and it felled prey to the expanding Kingdoms of Buganda and Nkore. Bunyoro-Kitara was the biggest and strongest kingdom in the interlacustrine region by the beginning of the Century. However, by the end of the 18th century, Bunyoro –Kitara had become weak and started to lose some of her territory. The provinces of Butambala, Gomba, Buddu, and Busoga were lost to Buganda. Some of her parts like Chope, Toro, and Buhweju had earlier broken away and declared their own independence.

In 1869, Kabalega succeeded his father Kamurasi as the King of Bunyoro –Kitara and he tried to reorganize and reconquering the lost glory of Bunyoro-Kitara. He trained and equipped his new standing army (the Abarusula). He embarked on wars of recapture. He started with Toro and then Chope. As he was beginning to move against Buganda, the British colonialists arrived. They supported Toro and Buganda against Kabalega and defeated and exiled him to Seychelles in 1899. Some of Bunyoro's provinces of Bugangaizi were given to Buganda. This left Bunyoro with only the present districts of Hoima and Masindi. The two counties were returned to Bunyoro after a referendum in 1964. The Kingdom of Bunyoro was among the others abolished in 1967. With the restoration of traditional cultural institutions in 1993, Prince Solomon Iguru, a descendant of Kabalega, was installed as heir to the throne of Bunyoro. Unlike his ancestors, however, he is a cultural leader with no political and administrative power. Under his patronage, the Banyoro are striving to salvage and maintain what they can of their age-old cultures.

## **8. THE NEW MOON AND EMPANGA CEREMONIES**

The Banyoro observed new moon ceremonies. During a new moon ceremony, people would assemble at the King's courts to dance to the tune of the music played by the royal bands-men. This was to celebrate the Omukama's having lived to see the new moon.

The royal band which comprised about twenty men performed the Ceremony. They participated in relays, playing drums, flutes and other wind instruments. The festivities of the new moon could go on for a few days at the King's palace. There was also an annual cerebation which used to go on for a period of nine days. This was arranged so that seven days could be celebrated at the King's mother's enclosure. This ceremony Empanga was normally held in the dry season between December and January. During the colonial period, this ceremony was modified and it was carried out once in three years for two to three days.

## **9. HOUSEHOLD AND VILLAGE SET-UP**

The Duties of political authority started from the household. In Bunyoro, the household was in effect a district. It was a Kingdom ruled over by Nyineka (the family head). The status of Nyineka was ideally inherited by the eldest son in the event of death.

The village was politically organized so that the level of cooperation within it was much more pronounced than outside it. Each village had a specially recognized elder known as mukuru w'omugongo. He was selected from among the elders and he acted as an intermediary between them and the chiefs. Besides, he had an informal court composed of him and a few other elders. This court settled the village disputes.

## **10. ECONOMY**

The Banyoro were a highly egalitarian society. Property was a criterion for distinguishing between superior and inferior persons. Land was an asset of economic importance and it was and was the basis of Bunyoro's economic activity. Their staple food included millet, potatoes, bananas, beans and meat. Certain foods were reserved for particular functions. For example a guest's meal had to consist of millet and meat. Potatoes were never given to a guest except in times of scarcity. A guest had to be given a meal at whatever time he arrived even if it was after midnight.

The society was stratified into Bairu, Bakama and Bahuma. The Bairu formed the majority population. They did different activities which were locally carried out. The year was divided into twelve months as follows:

- In January (Igesa), there would be harvesting millet.
- In February (Nyarakarwa), they did not have much work. The month was referred to as the months of white ants.
- In March (Ijubyamiyonga), fields were prepared for planting simsim\*.
- In May (Rwensisezere), there was not much work. The month was also referred to as the month of white ants.
- In July, (ishanya maro), women would prepare fields for millet.
- In August (Ikokoba) was the months of burning grass in the millet fields.
- In September (Isiga) was for planting millet.
- In October (ijuba) was a month of weeding.
- In November (Rwensenene) was named after grass hoppers
- In December (Nyamiganura or Katuruko) was a month of rejoicing and festivities as there was little work to occupy the people.

During pre-colonial days, Bunyoro was a centre of trade. There was salt trading from the salt deposits of Lake Katwe, Kasenyi and kapiro as well as iron-ore deposits near Masindi. The Banyoro were excellent iron smiths and this attracted many societies to come to Bunyoro for trade. The Banyoro were also experts in making red-hoes which were much required the societies east of Lake Kioga particularly the Langi and the Iteso.

*\*Simsim, the word for sesame in various Semitic languages. Also widely used in Arab-influenced East Africa.*

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