

Africans write back series

edited by
Heike Behrend

vol. 1

L.T. Rubongoya

Naaho Nubo

The Ways of our Ancestors

RÜDIGER KÖPPE VERLAG · KÖLN

Editor's Preface

During colonial times, in the 1950s, the French anthropologist and poet Michel Leiris published a text in which he demanded that the people researched, described, and represented by Western ethnographers should "write back". He called on African ethnographers and historians to counteract the imbalance and one-sidedness of the Western ethnographic perspective. Leiris expressed his hopes that the discourse of African ethnographers would differ essentially from that of Westerners and that their texts would fragment, expand, and criticize Western representations.

However, Leiris failed to notice that, from the beginning, Western discourse provoked responses from the people who were made the object of ethnographic studies. Africans quickly learned to read and write and produced texts in which they gave their own version of their culture and history. As a matter of fact, the production of texts never was the exclusive privilege of Western ethnographers. But Western hegemonic power meant that the texts of "informants", "anthropologists at home", and Western academic anthropologists each gained a different status.

To counteract this implicit hierarchization and to give Africans the chance "to write back", the text of the distinguished scholar L. T. Rubongoya is published in this series. His "Naaho Nubo: The Ways of Our Ancestors" gives his version of his own culture, the kingdom of Tooro. Although he as the author takes full responsibility of this text, the ethnographic and historical knowledge was generated in a complex collective process. For more than twenty years, Mr. Rubongoya has gathered around him highly respected ladies and gentlemen from Tooro who share his interest in culture, history and language, and he discussed with them various subjects that entered into this book. More than once I had the chance to take part in these discussions and enjoy the highly intellectual standards and the sophisticated debates.

Yet, with "Naaho Nubo: The Ways of Our Ancestors", the author does more than take the opportunity to "write back"; as he states in the introduction, his text on Tooro traditions also has to be seen as a response to the recent attempts of various fundamentalist

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Christian churches and movements to denigrate and reject African “traditional” religions. Instead of allowing Tooro traditions to be “satanized” and fall into oblivion, he not only carefully presents knowledge of the past, but also attempts to reconcile them with Christian teachings, especially the Old Testament. This is a unique and daring initiative that introduces an important voice defending African traditions.

The original version of this book was written in Rutooro. Various members of the MODRUG Association mentioned in the author’s introduction translated the text into English. It was decided not to use standard English for the translation but a version of “Tooroized English”.

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Heike Behrend

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*You ill-treated me while I was still alive.
 Let me see if you can still illtreat me now.
 You can no longer mistreat me now.
 So I shall do unto you what you did unto me
 While I was still on earth.
 I desired something to eat,
 You too, shall desire the same!
 I died lonely, so shall you.*

Alternatively as follows:

*I am so and so (name of the dead)
 Whom you killed!
 I pleaded to you for mercy unsuccessfully.
 I too shall have no mercy upon you.
 I shall torture you until you die.
 And when you are dead,
 I shall also kill your children one by one
 Until I have finished them all!*

Upon being convinced by the patient's attendants that the name the patient uttered was actually the name of the dead person he had mistreated, the divining doctors concluded that a person possessed something that stays with him all the time. It remains part and parcel of him. When he is in joy, so it is and likewise when he is in sorrow. But when he dies, it does not die, yet it does not part from him. At the time of his burial, it is interred with him and accompanies him to the underworld, where it remain with him indefinitely, even when the body has rotted and turned to dust. It will remain in the underworld (*okuzimu*) as a spirit (*omuzimu*). But belief has it that this can only be so if the person has died peacefully without a stigma caused by his relatives, or the friends he stayed with.

The existence of spirits having been confirmed, the task of all the goodwilled divining doctors was to search for ways and means to cure and control diseases caused by spirits. Afterwards the people of Kitara recognised the existence of the spirit in the same way they did with charms. Henceforth spirits were considered to be another of the causes of diseases to people. But this did not happen only in Kitara alone, it also occurred in other lands such as that of Israel where it is said that spirits traumatised people. But of course, every country has its own tale regarding the discovery of the existence of spirits. In the land of Israel, the most convincing story about the existence of spirits is that of the witch of Endor, whom Saul, the first king of Israel, requested to invoke the spirit of Samuel, the prophet, to come and reveal to him the way he should defeat the Philistines who had invaded his country (*I Samuel 28:3-19*).

The traumatising spirits are also cited extensively in the Holy Scriptures. You will recall the spirit which obstinately troubled Sarah, the daughter of Raguel, that used to kill every man who married her. But she was cleansed of it by Tobias, the son of Tobit, who in turn had been instructed by Raphael, the Archangel, to expel it by means of the liver and heart of the fish which he, Tobias, caught from River Tigris on their way to Media in the village of Reges, when on his way to collect his father's debt (*Tobit 8:1-8*). Some of the diseases that Christ healed were caused by spirits too (*Matthew 8:16, 28-32*).

2. Curing diseases caused by spirits

The goodwilled divining doctors who dare talk about their profession to people tell us that, of all the treatments they give to their patients, the most trying one is that of expelling spirits from them. If they find that the spirit has not yet entered the patient, they are obliged to induce it first to come from the underworld and enter into their patient or any other person holding a horn. Thereafter they trick it into a hole in a ball of wet clay and then shut it therein with extra wet clay. This is done with the help of the horns containing special charms that have the power to lure the spirit from the underworld. This carries great risks for the divining doctors as some

of the spirits they try to arrest are also capable of harming them in retribution for disturbing them.

A lot of singing and blowing of flutes precede inducing the spirits from the underworld so as to have them arrested. Once a spirit has come up and entered into the patient, or a person holding the horn by whose power it has been lured, the goodwilled diviners now lure it into a ball of clay that I have already informed about, containing a hole inside it and then shut it in with wet clay. They then look for an isolated place free from rain and deposit it there. However, some opinion givers disagreed with this method of arresting a spirit in a clay ball, arguing that when the clay in which it is locked up dries up, it can provide an opening for the spirit to escape. On the other hand, the goodwilled diviners contend that they put in the clay ball charms that are capable of luring the spirit into it and also locking it up therein indefinitely.

In addition, people do not believe in the suggestion that a spirit is arrested and after it has spoken out what it wants, it is then burnt. Opinion givers deny this saying that it is impossible for our fire to burn something that is essentially air, captured and after forcing it to reveal its motive, burn it. So far, all known scholars unanimously state that it is unbelievable for our fire to burn a spirit that is essentially air.

3. Being spirit possessed and offering sacrifices to the departed relatives' spirits

Apart from the spirits that used to come to seek vengeance, there also used to be relatives' spirits, which caused diseases to people in order to demand offerings. When this category was lured and arrested, they were taken into small shrines built for them in front of houses where they were constantly offered plantain liquor and meat. Parents' spirits had places reserved for them at the male walls¹ sometimes referred to as household heads' walls. The said

¹ In the story of Kihuka kya Njagijagi Abanywagi whose mother is said to have died shortly after his birth a different version is told. He was looked after by the spirit of his paternal grandmother which resided

male wall in traditional huts was on your right side as you left the house.

This practice of offering sacrifice to ancestral spirits originated from the divination of goodwilled divining doctors. When these goodwilled divining doctors found out that there were relatives' spirits that caused illness to people for the sake of being given sacrifices, they advised their clients to offer them food and drink so that they might be appeased. And in order to make people remain in harmony with their departed parents, they advised their clients to show respect to their departed parents by offering them plantain beer whenever they brewed and a millet meal made from the first harvest of the last crop of millet in the year (*omwaka omusaija*). This had to be done because their parents did very many good things for them when they were still on earth especially when they, as their children, were still young. Thenceforth it became customary practice for most of the people of Kitara to place a gourd full of plantain liquor at the male wall whenever liquor was brewed in the home, and a millet meal at the same wall whenever the first harvest of the last crop of millet in the year was harvested. That beer was consumed by the household head with his intimate friends, but the millet used to be eaten by him and his wife. Sometimes grown up relatives and some other people also ate it for the purpose of making that function appear as great honour to the departed.

Another reason that might have caused people to honour the spirit of the long dead is the belief that generally when a dead person is remembered, his spirit continues to stay with his fellow living dead. But when he is forgotten his spirit deserts his fellow living dead and goes to a place where all sorts of spirits of people without relatives gather and thus losing his humanness. This has been the basis of the

under the cooking stone from where it constantly emerged to advise him on what to do. This was extraordinary because normally spirits of departed relatives do not reside under the cooking stone. The only spirit that resides under the cooking stone is that of the Mucwezi **Kaikara Ihiga Nyabuzaana Rubunbuguza rwa Mugizi**. The mediums of this spirit in order to invoke it bend over the cooking stone before the spirit possesses them. The story of Kihuka kya Njagijagi Abanywagi Mbere Orufu Rugonga Orundi Rwaboine Enaku Naakyazaarwa is related in a book containing a chapter about the clans of the people of Kitara.