THE BELIEF SYSTEM OF BANYARWANDA

I. INTRODUCTION

The belief system of the Banyarwanda is oriented in a perspective of the relationship. We can say, rightly, that human being is unique, he can say "I", and he is an individual. At the same time, it is true that human being does not exist as an individual in himself, or to himself. He is always from his birth, a human-in-relation. A human existence is an existence in communion. It orders itself to the family, to the community, to the society or to the culture. A Rwandan proverb say: Abantu ni magirirane (humans are people in solidarity). The individual is never conceives outside the community. Munyarwanda still saying in his proverbs that Kubaho ni ukubana (being is being together). This fundamental solidarity of Banyarwanda in belief system is expressed by the term Ubumwe (unity of life in harmony, in fellowship, in cooperation). It is a vital link between living beings and among the dead, vertically and horizontally. He is the animating principle that is in them all. This is the result of a communion, of participation in the same reality with the living and the dead.¹

Therefore, we will approach the traditional religion of Banyarwanda in this perspective of Ubumwe as the key of belief system of Banyarwanda whereby the harmony of life is nothing else than a reciprocal relationship between the members descending from the same ancestor. With the traditional religion of Banyarwanda then, we will see how to live in harmony is to participate in the sacred life of ancestors. It is also to be aware of contingency of human being in order to rely in the Supreme Being.

II. THE CONCEPT OF BANYARWANDA

The concept "Banyarwanda" we prefer in this work can be understood in two acceptances: a restricted acceptance and wide acceptance. The first can be assumed by defining the term Banyarwanda as citizens of Rwanda. However, our concern is not limited to the question of citizenship; it goes beyond that up to what can be understood as the common. Nothing other than the culture that preoccupied us more. Therefore, the concept of Banyarwanda generally means the people who share the same Rwandan culture: the same language of Kinyarwanda and the same custom. These people are not only the citizens of Rwanda; we can find them in other countries of

great lakes for the reason of history and of migration. Out of Rwanda, they are more established in eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo and in west of Uganda. For a better understanding, we have to go back to the pre-colonial time, when the royalty of Gasabo, in current Rwanda, had conquered many surrounding royalties to form one Kingdom of Rwanda. It is in this movement whereby the royalty of Bwisha, in eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo, and the one of Rukiga, in west of Uganda, were included in the Kingdom of Rwanda. From these conquests, the Banyarwanda should dwell in these newly occupied territories for reasons of pastures and other motives regarding the wellbeing of their daily life. Then, with the division of Africa by the Europeans in Conference of Berlin (1884-1885), some different parts whereby we could find Banyarwanda, were given to other countries. However, being the citizens of other countries, they did not forget their culture.

III. THE TRADITIONAL RELIGION OF BANYARWANDA

In general, the daily life of Banyarwanda is marked by religion. For them, religion is the bond of union between human beings themselves, between human beings and the spirits of ancestors, then between human beings and the Supreme Being. It is also a cultural set of ideas, feelings and rituals based on the belief in two worlds, the visible and the invisible; on the community and hierarchical nature of these two entities and their interaction, the transcendence of the invisible world, without hindering its immanence. From this understanding, it follows that religion fit into the philosophy of Banyarwanda and reversals.  

The traditional religion of Banyarwanda occurs mainly through four major rites that are *guterekera* (communion with the ancestors), *kubandwa* (being possessed by a spirit or higher initiation into the cult of Lyangombe), the cult of Nyabingi and lastly, veneration of *Imana* (God).

➢ *Guterekera (communion with the ancestors).*

Les Banyarwanda believe that the human being is a living being that has an existing incorruptible soul or spirit. Here is understood that the human being is composed of body and soul in the belief of the Banyarwanda. They believe that at death the body is separated from the spirit or soul. Then the body dies completely and the spirit becomes *umuzimu* (a non-living being, but possesses

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2 Vincent Mulago, *Un visage africain du Christianisme*, 82-83.
intelligence or an existing spirits private of life but which has intelligence). The umuzimu does not live like those on earth, but it may intervene in the daily lives of people. The non-living beings who have the intelligence or the manes are classified into four categories in the belief system of Banyarwanda.

1. Abakurambere (the elders): These are the direct ancestors (every father and mother) to which is added paternal uncles and aunts, brothers, sisters and children of the person concerned, who died in peace with their relatives to whom is kept a serene memory.

2. Impagu (lateral branching): These are the spirits of unclassified relatedness among Abakurambere.

3. Ingabwa (who run the family): These are abakurambere (elders) which were designated by the oracle divination as patrons who are lucky holder of each individual in the family.

4. Abagwagasi (outsiders dead): They are spirits of unknown people. In Banyarwanda’s culture, when someone dies outside of his family is called umugwagasi. It means that this category of the spirit concerns the spirit of the unknown people who could have died on the land of Banyarwanda.

Of these four categories, only the spirit of abakurambere are always good and protectors. They sometimes come to visit their descendants. For this visit, Banyarwanda will built their places (small houses called ingoro (sanctuary) in the ground) for offering sacrifices. It is this act of offering sacrifice to the spirit, which is called guterekera. It is a pejorative word of gutereka, the cultural practice of communion with others especially during the familial ceremony or a friendship ceremony. If a Munyarwanda could have example to celebrate the marriage of his child, all the family gathered for drinking and eating then the elders must addressing them on the main issue of gathering. Therefore, this practice of gathering was called gutereka umuryango. Approximatively

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5 The translation of these four categories of abazimu (spirits) in the understanding of Banyarwanda is not a literary one. We try to give a translation that gives sense for each category according to the context. For example, a literary translation of Abakurambere will be the growing-before instead of elders because it is a complex word: abakurambere. Of the verb Gukura (to grow) and the word i-mbere (before). However, we simplified by saying elders. It is the same on the other following categories. The true meaning is given by the explanation.
it means to receive the family. This is where come from the name *Guterekera abazimu*. Approximatively it means also to receive the spirit.

However, why Banyarwanda communed with their ancestors? In their traditional society, the culture of the ancestors was to "cement the union"\(^7\) between those living on earth and those in the afterlife. This practice is even a guarantor of social order and ensures harmony between livings. Thus, when there is a major life event such as marriage for example, it is necessary to consult the ancestors of the family to know their opinion. Therefore, Banyarwanda communicate with his ancestors, because life to be authentic, must observe the order of the ancestors. They have a great reverence for the ancestors, because they spontaneously believe that the dead are not dead\(^8\) and that they have another life. For the Banyarwanda, the ancestors were involved in their concrete and daily life for communicating with them, and for offering happiness to them. Ultimately, the desire to pay homage to ancestors, to remember them, to strengthen family and social relationship between them and the living is recommendable. However, it is illusory to believe that the spirits can provide earthly happiness to their descendants and inflict misery to their opponents. Indeed, to increase the helplessness of *abazimu* the spirits, a proverb says that *umuzimu arira ku munyagasani* (a dead man is nourished by a living).

➢ **Kubandwa (initiation to the cult of Lyangombe)**

Another rite of traditional religion of Banyarwanda is the initiation into the cult of Lyangombe, commonly called *kubandwa*. Before talking about this initiation, we will talk briefly about Lyangombe. According to historians, Lyangombe is a person who existed. He arrived in Rwanda under King Ruganzu II Ndoli (1510-1543). He was from Gitara cya Muliro, in Uganda, the present province of Toro. After his death, he became a great spirit and under him, there is other spirits called *imandwa*.\(^9\) He is honoured in Banyarwanda’s traditional religion and in some parts of the Great Lakes.

To explain more about Lyangombe, Father Vincent Mulago will say that a hunted antelope was the one to kill Lyangombe, when he was hunting with his followers: *ibicwezi*. To enhance a

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prosaic end this antelope has been promoted to the rank of buffalo. On the death of their leader, the whole troop of *ibicwezi* (synonym of *imandwa*) would collectively committed suicide around his mortal body. Under Mutara I, son and successor of Ruganzu II, broken out a serious epidemic in the kingdom of Rwanda. This misfortune was attributed to the spirits of *ibicwezi*, to whom it was supposed to revenge their blood. Therefore to appease those spirits, it was decided the general initiation of all Banyarwanda to the cult of Lyangombe. It was supposed that in this way, *ibicwezi* will no longer attack people who become their supporters. This is how the religion of *imandwa* would have imposed on Banyarwanda. Moreover, are called *imandwa* the *abazimu* (souls or spirits of the dead) who share the honours of *kubandwa* with Lyangombe. The main known and honoured *imandwa* are for example Nyundo (grandfather of Lyangombe), Babinga (his father), Nyiralyangombe (his mother), Nyirakajumba (his wife), Binego (his son), Gacamuwe, Ruhambo, Ruhoha, Mashira (magicians), etc.

At its liabilities, the cult of Lyangombe in terms of culture, moral and intellectual is negative. That is why, perhaps, that the modern school does not refer to the rites of Lyangombe. We reminder also that, for a Christian, the supposed advantages of initiation into the cult of Lyangombe are acquired through the gift of God in Jesus Christ himself. Therefore, self-consecration to Lyangombe for a Christian is to reject radically the commitments of baptism.

➢ **The cult of Nyabingi**[^10]

This cult was widespread in the North of Rwanda. Its founder is a woman named Nyabingi. She possesses some people, especially young girls, and acts through a minister appointed with the name *umugirwa* (he who is possessed). It means that is a man or woman, who pronounces oracles in foreign language, in the name of Nyabingi. Passages of occultisms are done before the oracle. Yet, nothing happens without copious offerings in terms of money, beer or cattle, in favour of the minister. For fans of Nyabingi, his cult expressed a religious need for communication with the invisible world, whose intervention was believed necessary for man's earthly happiness. The effectiveness attributed to this cult was based on the magic power of the minister of Nyabingi either of herself.

However, this cult is can be an obstacle for development, because the magical beliefs distract people from work and normal means of maintaining or preserving bodily or mental health.

➢ **The veneration of Imana (God).**

Above the visible and invisible creatures, Banyarwanda know the Supreme God, Creator of all things, and they call him Imana. In Banyarwanda’s culture, the Supreme God is recognized in many attributes: ¹¹

- **Iyambere:** Existing One, that does not depend on other creatures. In other words, God is the Eternal.
- **Iyakare:** the starting point of all except himself that is to say He is the Initial.
- **Rurema:** the one who sets up all beings. He is the Creator of the visible and invisible beings.
- **Rugira:** It means that he is the Efficient, the first cause of all that exists.
- **Rugabo:** the Almighty, It means that he does not need any help.
- **Rugaba:** the Giver, etc.

As we said that the daily life of Banyarwanda is marked by religion, we can see how those attributes of God are expressed by cultural naming. We would like to give examples respectively of name for each attribute of God to show how many Banyarwanda are so much branched on their cultural belief system. Therefore, we have the name like Habiyambere, Habiyakare, Niyorurema, Habarugira, Niyongabo, Mukeshimana or Niwemugaba, etc. Those names precise correspondingly, to attributes of God we have mentioned here above.

All of these attributes are summed up in one: "God's omnipotence" as shown in this Rwandan proverb: *Impigi ntihiga Imana* (the amulet does not brave God even challenge him). In other words, God is either more powerful than all human structures or mystical forces that contain amulets and fetishes. God is the source of life. He is the Giver of all good and his omnipotence serves to defend people and give them what they need. So in Kinyarwanda it is said: *Imana ikunanurira itakweretse icebe* (God is about to calve for you, without showing you the

development of the udder). In other words, man should not be worry about what he will eat tomorrow; God is there to look for him. With this proverb, someone can believe that God favors laziness on the people but Rwandan traditional wisdom responds negatively by this proverb: *Usabira Imana ku ishyiga ikagusiga ivu* (you pray to God by staying near the hearth; He covers you from the ashes). It means that, it is not enough to ask God, we must set to work to get what we need. Therefore, God help the people of initiative, as confirmed another proverb *Abajya Inama, Imana irabasanga* (those who take counsel together, God join them). In other words, the providence and goodness of God require human activity.

In short, from the attributes of Imana (God) that venerate the Banyarwanda and from relative proverbs, we can deduce that Imana is One God, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent who leads all by his universal providence. He is the source of goodness and cannot be evil; He is immutable, does not change and does not make mistakes. He is eternal and transcendent.

**IV. CONCLUSION**

In their system, the Banyarwanda consider life as a very important value that must be well taken in care. That is why they pay homage to the Lord of life: *Imana*, through the ancestors and especially Lyangombe, the hero of the spirits. This attention on the life impels the Banyarwanda to appeal to ancestors who have died. This is because they believe that the dead are not died by the fact of considering the existence of two worlds: visible and invisible. They believe that the body and the spirit compose together a human being. Death is the end of the body but the spirit still living in the invisible world, where it takes the name *umuzimu* in Kinyarwanda. Then it receive the extraordinary power, which surpasses the one it has while it was with the body. Therefore, *umuzimu* (spirit) can be reincarnated in other living being and intervene in the life of the living. This is the reason why the Banyarwanda, who believe in their traditional religion have to be initiated into the traditional rites in terms of religion. As we have seen, those rites are *Guterekera, kubandwa*, the cult of Nyabingi. However, the circumstance of the Supreme power in their belief takes them into the veneration of God what they call *Imana*. From the research of different scholars of the same culture, we can see how it is this Supreme power or Supreme Being that gives meaning to their lives and upholds *ubumwe* (the harmony in their relationship). The way of naming In Banyarwanda’s culture shows very well this reality.
V. BIBLIOGRAPHY


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