

Letter to the Editor

BASUBA, BAGANDA AND ABHAKURIA

I HAVE just finished reading Michael Kenny's interesting article 'The relation of oral history to social structure in South Nyanza, Kenya' in *Africa* 47(3), 1977. His article is concerned with the Basuba (Umusubha—singular; Abhasuba—plural). Since I am interested in the social and cultural history of the Abhakuria (Umukhuria—singular), the closest ethnic group to the Basuba in terms of language, cultural traits and geography, I should like to comment on Kenny's observations and perhaps throw new light on his findings or contentions. The Abhakuria and Basuba share fundamental cultural traits, such practices as circumcision of both sexes, piercing of ear lobes, 'age-sets' and 'generation classes'. I should confess from the outset that I am myself an Umkuria, being from Tarime, in the Mara region of Tanzania.

The Abhakuria are a Bantu speaking people who are both cattle keepers and agriculturalists (see Ruel 1962; 1965). They occupy the northeastern lowlands and hills of Lake Victoria in Kenya and Tanzania. Thus they are located in the South Nyanza district of Kenya (as are the Basuba) and in Tanzania, in Tarime, Serengeti and Musoma districts. It should be mentioned that three other branches of Basuba, namely Barieri, Bakine and Abakwachi (called Gwasi by Kenny) are also located in Tarime district, Tanzania. Although all Abhakuria speak Gikuria, which is a Bantu language, there is strong evidence to suggest that they are peoples of diverse origins ranging from Kalenjin to proto-Bantu stock, (see Ruel 1962; Baker 1953: 96).

According to Abhakuria oral traditions, Basuba are Abhakuria who, over the years, have been influenced and partly absorbed by Luo immigrants, and perhaps, by a few immigrants from Uganda, possibly Basoga and Baganda. However, despite the massive influence of the Luo, the basic language of the Basuba, except those on the islands of Rusinga and Mfangano, is still a form of Gikuria. In fact when I visited the islands in 1976, the majority of the elders had no problem in communicating with me in Gikuria. These elders also shared with me an interesting conversation on basic cultural traditions like 'age sets', 'generation classes' and circumcision, even though many of them were quick to point out that 'Luo-ization' was becoming a *fait accompli* amongst the younger generations. Ironically, Gikuria is still widely understood even by the 'Luo-ized' Basuba who now occupy Awendo and Migori in South Nyanza District, Kenya. But there is no doubt that 'Luo-ization' amongst Basuba has been strongest in Kenya and weakest in Tarime District, Tanzania, where the Abhakuria are the dominant ethnic group.¹

What intrigued me most in Kenny's article was his contention that Basuba have some connection with Baganda, Basoga and Baluhiya, while totally overlooking the more living connection with Abhakuria, a people with whom they share so much. It is my contention that no study on Basuba history can be undertaken without due regard to their connection with the Abhakuria.

Although I have no intention of rejecting some Basuba's claim to Ugandan origin, I strongly feel that there is a need for the scholars who have accepted this claim to explain why Basuba language, names and circumcision rituals remain practically the same as Abhakuria. Here it is important too, to note that circumcision of either sex is tabooed among Baganda, Basoga and Luo. And while the Abaluhiya do circumcize men, they do not extend the practice to their women folk—a practice that obtains among all the non-Luo-ized Basuba.

Since language is a most essential tool and guideline in the study of history through oral deductions (see Vansina 1967; Henige 1974), it may be seen to provide suggestive evidence of Basuba connection with Abhakuria. In 1976 while I was working as a junior research fellow at the Institute of African Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya, I visited a good number of 'Luo-ized' Basuba elders who live at Awendo and Migori in South Nyanza district, Kenya, and the Gwasi, Bukine and Burieri Basuba in Tanzania. I was surprised to find that most of these elders spoke Egesoba (Kisuba) and that, since I speak Gikuria, we did not need any interpreter. All of them knew their 'age sets' and 'generation classes' which have the same

names as those of the Abhakuria, especially the 'generation classes', which are a hallmark of Abhakuria culture (see Binagi 1976). And although some of them bear Luo names they were quick to give their Suba names, like Wambura, Sabahi and Matiko. Ironically, a Luhiya colleague could find only very few words that Kisuba shared with the Luhiya language; the same was true of a Muganda colleague. And, while Luo has now become the dominant language of the Basuba in Rusinga, Mfangano and Migori, these Basuba elders admit, that it is just a new influence, the irresistible popular culture in South Nyanza, Kenya. Probably it should be mentioned that in the cases of Bukine and Burieri my contacts were vehemently opposed to the idea of being associated with the Luo, even though 'Luo-ization' has made a very strong impact amongst the younger generation.

Thus, while I am not questioning the validity of Kenny's field findings in Rusinga and Mfangano, where 'Luo-ization' seems to have gone very deep, I am inclined to argue that his findings might have been different had he not restricted his study to the Islands; that he should have been more aware of the Basuba's linguistic and cultural affinity with Abhakuria. Moreover, I feel strongly that there is no way that one can conduct reliable field work using oral deductions without a thorough knowledge of the language through which the traditions have been handed down.² And it is on this ground that I find Dr M. J. Ruel's work on the Abhakuria and their affiliated ethnic groups a classic work of reference and far above the other works that have made some mention of the connections between Abhakuria, Basuba, Luo, Gusii and Luhiya.³ Unfortunately, Dr Ruel's excellent brief work on the Abhakuria did not cover the Basuba. Thus, while Kenny's findings are a welcome addition, they lack linguistic and cultural confirmation, leaving a considerable gap for future researchers to fill.

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NOTES

¹ Prior to Tanzanian Independence in 1961, it seemed that most of the Barieri, Bakine and Abakwachi were accepting Luo-ization. However, after Independence there was a tendency for these people to evoke their Kuria connection and to reject Luo influence, despite the fact that quite a number of them speak and understand Luo.

² I am not, of course, implying that Kenny has no knowledge of Kisuba or Luo but that, if that knowledge had been deep enough, he would have realized the importance of the Kuria connection.

³ See Ogot 1967; Were 1967; also William Ochieng's Ph.D. thesis on the Gusii at the University of Nairobi.

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