Ritual and History : the Case of Nyabingi
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I

The religious traditions among the people of northern Rwanda, particularly in the areas of northern Byumba and northern Ruhengeri resemble, in some respects, those typical of much of the interlacustrine region. These people recognize a supreme deity, pay reverence to spirits of departed ancestors and enact the kubandwa ritual, giving homage to certain imandwa spirits. In one important respect, however, their tradition is not typical of the broader region: the Bakiga and Banyarwanda of these northern territories worship a deity unique to this relatively small region—a region which includes Kigezi in southern Uganda and the very mountainous land rising to the north and northwest of the Rugezi swamp, in northern Rwanda. They believe in the powers of Nyabingi, alternatively known as Bihoko, a woman who has figured significantly in the history of this specific area, and who now is revered for her considerable powers. A number of devout followers, known as bagirwa, now represent Nyabingi’s spirit to the people of this area who look to her spiritual power for protection of their health and fertility.

The worship of Nyabingi differs markedly from the other forms of worship (in particular, the kubandwa, to which it has often been compared) prevalent in the area. This difference may be described from various points of view. It differs firstly in a functional sense. The kubandwa, according to one interpretation, has functioned as a protest, by the masses, against an established order ruled by a divine king. Another interpretation has demonstrated how the ritual of the kubandwa, by virtue of its use of symbols found in the ritual of royal investiture, is an expression, by all members of the society, of their common submission and acceptance of the ideology of kingship. Interpretations of the kubandwa ritual generally presume an already existing political structure; it is thought either to support or to protest against an ideology of political inequality.

While it is difficult to specify the precise political function of Nyabingi, one can readily say that it has not served to protest or sustain a political order. Nyabingi worship has arisen primarily in areas without complex political organizations.

1. The population of this area of Rwanda seldom claims to be Munyarwanda by tradition. The people here generally claim allegiance to large families, ruled traditionally by local leaders who proclaimed themselves independent of the mwami. Those whose families came from the North, that is from Kigezi in Uganda, may even claim to be Bakiga, though this word, Bakiga, is quite vague. It was German occupation that brought many of these families under the mwami’s control by force, and caused these people to become Banyarwanda. These northern people recognize this fact, generally with contempt, in saying umuzungu ni rusangiza ‘it was the White man who caused us to eat together’.


If it has had any function at all, this has been to provide an ideology of authority for an incipient political organization, where none had existed before.

The worship of Nyabingi differs further from a structural point of view. The kubandwa is a public ceremony—a ritual in the course of which an individual is initiated into a secret society. It is by virtue of such an initiation, that an individual pledges himself to obey and impersonate one of the deities in the imandwa pantheon, and thereby acquires the deity’s assistance in various earthly matters. There is no initiation, no secret society nor, in most cases, formal public ceremony, for the worship of Nyabingi. Nyabingi is represented on earth by bagirwa, priests, who have privileged access to her. These representatives are able to contact Nyabingi on behalf of those who seek Nyabingi’s assistance or intervention in their affairs. There is, in effect, no formal ritual associated with the worship of Nyabingi. There are, rather, private seances with a representative capable of making one’s appeals known to Nyabingi.

Finally, the identity of Nyabingi as part of a recent history, sets Nyabingi apart from concepts of the supreme deity and the imandwa from yet another point of view. The deities of the kubandwa pantheon have only a vague historical identity. Despite the remarkable work of Luc De Heusch in tracing the historical diffusion that the imandwa have undergone prior to being introduced into Rwanda, their historical reality is still quite vague. Nyabingi, on the other hand, has a more accessible historical identity. The circumstances which give the imandwa an historical identity are quite remote, while the circumstances which give Nyabingi an historical identity are considerably more recent. Not everyone agrees on what these circumstances were, but everyone does have a sense of Nyabingi’s continuing presence in this region where she once lived and influenced events. The image of Nyabingi as an historical figure is more convincing than for other objects of reverence.

One would expect, therefore, that the ritual and mythology connected with Nyabingi should be imbued with an historicity that accounts, in part, for the inspiration that the Bakiga and Banyarwanda receive from them. Yet this historicity has only rarely been understood or even recognized. The expressions used by the bagirwa in the course of sessions evoking Nyabingi, refer to personalities and places all of which have a discoverable historical reality. It is my purpose in this essay to expose the setting of past events within which the names, expressions, and clichés used in the ritual of consultation find an historical meaning. These ritual expressions should appear, then, as conjunctions of the past and present—vehicles by which a symbolic structure and a social heritage are woven into a single ritual discourse.

II

The ritual setting for contacting Nyabingi involves a personal consultation with the mugirwa who falls into a trance and thereby allows Nyabingi’s spirit to speak through his or her person. Once the mugirwa is possessed by the spirit, the visitors may ask specific questions: they may ask Nyabingi to intercede to cure a sick child or simply to counsel them in personal affairs.

The incantations, songs and exclamations used in the course of the meeting need not be introduced according to any fixed pattern. No one expects there to be regular liturgy at these occasions. There are, however, certain phrases or clichés referring to names, genealogies and events which do inevitably occur. These expressions, in the context of this seance, evoke Nyabingi’s spiritual presence, and the mugirwa, in conducting the drama of his possession, uses them at critical junctures in the proceedings. For example: as the session comes to a close, and as the mugirwa returns to his normal self, he assures his client that the voice of Nyabingi has been authentic. With great emphasis he then proclaims ‘Should I be lying, send me to the Bagina who have killed Murari!’
The *mugirwa* may call out certain sacred names—Murari, Gahaya, Nyakajunga, Nyabunyana, and Rubunda—at other junctures in the session. These names invoke persons who are thought to have been part of Nyabingi's immediate family. The art most often combined in genealogies such as *Gahaya ka Murari wa Nyakajunga*. The order in which these are arranged does not, at first, seem to be important since it is equally common to hear the same names in reverse sequence: *Murari wa Gahaya*. Another name, Nyabunyana, also occurs in the seances. During the initial stages of the consultation, before a *mugirwa* agrees to enter into contact with Nyabingi, he may require the client to bring a sheep; he designates this sheep for sacrifice to *Nyabunyana, the mother of Nyabingi*.¹

Certain incantations are simply elaborate repetitions of familiar genealogies, such as the following: ‘quickly Rutindangyezi, lightning of Gahaya, son of Murari, grandson of Rubunda’ while others may tell something of the places where Nyabingi has passed with her followers in arriving in Rwanda: ‘Nyabingi of my father, be with you, you have come by way of Mahura [Muhura], you have come by Mpororo, you have passed by Nدورwa and have crossed the Nduga, Rutindangeri, son of Gahaya, be with you’.

III

These, then are some of the more important elements of liturgy in the drama during which believers express their reverence for Nyabingi and seek her counsel. It would seem that the relevance of such persons as Murari and Gahaya, of the Bagina and places such as Muhura and Mpororo to the historical circumstances of Nyabingi’s emergence as a center of religious attention, should be essential to an understanding of the cult. Yet there is virtually no consensus among those who have done research in this area concerning these questions: who were these persons? In what historical context did they become associated with Nyabingi? Who is Nyakajunga? Why does one swear by referring to how the Bagina killed Murari?

Inquiries have been made in Kigezi, Byumba and Ruhengeri on these questions, but the reports provide no consensus. This is due in part to the fact that the Bakiga and Banyarwanda themselves do not espouse any one hypothesis or tradition about the history of Nyabingi. In fact there are two and perhaps more quite distinct sets of traditions telling of the background to Nyabingi worship prevailing in Kigezi and Northern Rwanda.

One set recounts how Nyabingi arrived in the area from the Congo. Its cast of characters includes Rutagirakijune, Kanzanira, Gahu, and Ruhara. A typical version relates how Rutagirakijune came from Mpimbi, where she supposedly learned of Nyabingi, and travelled east, revealing the power of Nyabingi to a few chosen individuals. These individuals were Kanzanira, Gahu, Ruhara and others, who in turn became famous *bagirwa*. All this took place during the reign of Rwabugiri. The names, Gahaya and Murari, seldom figure in this set of traditions, except as deities with vague identities. In sum, this set of traditions asserts that the tradition of worshiping Nyabingi comes from the west and that the practice arrived in Rwanda just prior to the 1900s.

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1. Interview with Musa, June 20, 1971, Bigaga, Kigezi.
3. Ibid.: 278.
Another set of traditions attempts to relate Nyabingi to a quite different era. This group of traditions recognizes in one way or another that Nyabingi had something to do with the royal family in Ndorwa—a family that disappeared long ago. Among the members of this family were Murari and Gahaya, and others. All of these persons lived well before Kigeri Rwabugiri, perhaps even during the reign of Kiheri Ndabarasa. Furthermore the capital of these kings of Ndorwa was to the northeast of Rwanda. In sum, this set of traditions asserts that the tradition of worshiping Nyabingi comes from the east and that the practice arrived in Rwanda considerably before the 1900's.

A number of Bakiga and Banyarwanda are familiar with both sets of traditions, and their reaction is to say that one contradicts the other. Elders and other knowledgeable people are inclined to support one to the exclusion and discredit of the other. Only a few attempt to reconcile them by weaving the names and places into a single period. In either case the historical perspective on Nyabingi emerges confused. The lack of consensus among historians or missionaries who have written on this subject merely reflects the lack of consensus among the Banyarwanda themselves.

The ritual context in which the names Murari and Gahaya most commonly appear and by which they are most generally known, seems, at first glance, to complicate the historical perspective even more. On further investigation, however, the unusual and apparently contradictory way these names are used in ritual discourse, provides a clue for removing some of the ambiguity surrounding Nyabingi's history.

The problem these names pose is this: the expressions in which the names appear arrange them into genealogical patterns; yet these arrangements are not logically consistent. Gahaya may be given as the son of Murari, as in 'Gahaya ka Murari wa Nyakajunga'. In the context of other expression, such as 'Murari wa Nyakajunga mwana wa Gahaya', Gahaya becomes the ancestor and not the son of Murari. This same inconsistency appears in a number of traditions. Some accounts say that Murari succeeded Nyakajunga, while others explain how Gahaya, son of Murari, gave Nyakajunga a royal drum making Nyakajunga a successor of Murari. Another important figure, Rubunda, is said to have been the successor of Gahaya in some accounts, and the grandfather of Gahaya in others.

There are two possible explanations for this discrepancy: one is that the ritual use of these names distorts historical fact and that oral traditions are unreliable. In this case, an historical inquiry becomes impossible. Another is to assume that these apparent discrepancies are not distortions of fact at all but do, in some way, represent historical reality. One must propose, then, an historical explanation that is capable of comprehending these apparent contradictions. In this particular case, such an explanation might be that there are more individuals than one in Ndorwa's history who carry the name of Murari, and more than one person named Gahaya. One assumes, in others words, that if a given individual is related to Gahaya in two different ways, the name Gahaya refers to two different persons.

IV

This latter explanation is in fact true for the names Gahaya and Murari. Furthermore, it is an important step in making possible a reconstruction of the history of Nyabingi and its relation to the kings and kingdom of Ndorwa.

1. Interview with Besheshye, June 5, 1971, Muvumba, Byumba.
We know, for example, that a certain Gahaya II Ka Muzora was reigning in Ndorwa at the same time that Cyilima Rujugira was ruling in Rwanda. If this Gahaya was a second Gahaya then we may expect there to have been a first Gahaya at some moment in history. This is quite likely since Ndorwa had been a major power well before the reign of Cyilima Rujugira. In fact, the period during which Ndorwa's expansions reached a maximum was almost a century before the reign of Cyilima Rujugira, when Kigeri Nyamuheshura ruled in Rwanda.¹

The ruler, Murari, is customarily thought to have fathered Gahaya II. This would make Murari contemporary with Cyilima Rujugira, or perhaps before. However a number of sources speak of another Murari who, in reviving the kingdom of his ancestors much later, established a court at Bukire during the reign of Yuhi Gahindiro in Rwanda. This Murari was attacked and killed by Rwandan forces.² At least a century separates these two persons identified as Murari.

The recurrence of the same royal names at different moments of history makes sense only with reference to a practice unique to the royal dynasties in the interlacustrine area. Individual rulers, acceding to office in a particular kingdom, received one of a set of names which occurred repeatedly throughout the history of this kingdom. Five kings named Ntare appear at different periods in the history of Nkole. Four kings named Kimenyi appear at different moments in the chronicles of Gisaka. In some cases the repetition of a set of names occurred in a regular pattern—that is, cyclically—throughout the history of a kingdom. Hence, in Rwanda, a Kigeri regularly followed a Cyilima (or a Mutara), a Mibambwe regularly followed a Kigeri, and a Yuhi regularly followed a Mibambwe.³ It is only reasonable that the Bashambo of Ndorwa should also have designated their kings according to a repeating cycle of names, including, in particular, the names Murari and Gahaya.

With this in mind, many of the anomalies of the history of Ndorwa begin to dissolve and we can begin to have a clearer picture of the historical context of Nyabingi.

V

Assuming that, as in the other interlacustrine kingdoms, the names in the dynasty of the Bashambo-ruled kingdom of Ndorwa recurred, one may begin to inquire how the cycles of kingship merge with the historical facts available for the history of Ndorwa. Given the various sources of history for the Bashambo—their own traditions as well as the relevant traditions of surrounding kingdoms—one can attempt to sort out and order the major events, posing in each case this question: with which one of the possible repetitions of Murari and Gahaya can an event or a cluster of events be associated?

There is no way of knowing, in advance, how many repetitions of Murari and Gahaya occurred in Ndorwa's past. In comparison with the ruling dynasty's genealogy in Rwanda, the genealogy for the Bashambo kings is extremely vague and discontinuous. There are considerable gaps in the chronology, periods when no kings at all are mentioned.

The events themselves, however, do suggest a certain pattern. The major events of Ndorwa's history, along with the names and places associated with them, seem to cluster into three groups, suggesting three periods of intense and concerted activity in Ndorwa. It is quite probable that the rulers during each one of these outstanding phases of Ndorwa's history received, or took for themselves, names

associated with a recognized royal lineage. These names were Murari and Gahaya. It seems to have further been the rule that whenever there was a Murari, a Gahaya immediately succeeded him. One may conjecture, then, that there were three kings named Murari followed in each case by a Gahaya, reigning during each one of the three distinct phrases of Ndorwa’s tradition.

The first of these phases seems to have been simultaneous with the reign of Kigeri Nyamuheshera in Rwanda. Sources differ on the dates of his reign: one source gives 1672 for his death, another, 1609. In any case, this earliest period of Bashambo consolidation in Ndorwa can be dated approximately a century before Cyilima Rujugira, since there are three kings separating Cyilima and Kigeri in the royal genealogy. It is said of Kigeri Nyamuheshera, that he annexed territories between the volcanoes and the Congolese forests, but when marching farther north, he took care to ‘leave to his right the kingdom of Ndorwa, a kindgom too powerful at the time’.

D’Arianoff’s account of the reign of Kimenyi Rwahashya—king of Gisaka who came to power while Kigeri Nyamuheshera was on the throne in Rwanda—attests to the considerable strength of Ndorwa at this comparatively early date. Around this time, Gisaka and Ndorwa came to blows, as a result of an enmity between their queens. Ndorwa defeated Gisaka, and the queen of Ndorwa commemorated the victory by slicing off the breasts of her adversary. Ndorwa captured considerable territory from Gisaka extending its boundary as far south as Eastern Buganza in Rwanda.

A second phase of Ndorwa’s past emerges perhaps a century later. It centers around the reign of Gahaya II Muzora Ka Murari. Cyilima Rujugira was reigning in Rwanda when he came to power; one may place the reign of this Gahaya, leaving considerable margin for error, somewhere between the dates of 1720 and 1760. He was preceded by a Murari who is remembered for having moved the capital of Ndorwa northward into the present Kigezi district of Kajara and for having conquered much of the territory that was later incorporated into the kingdom of Ankole. During this period of expansion, Ndorwa reached its height of power. When Gahaya II succeeded him, Ndorwa began to decline.

Gisaka had been increasing in strength around this time (during the reign of Ruregeya: 1700-1725), in defeating Mubari and extending its territory to the north. Successive kings in Gisaka were not able to defend the territory incorporated by Ruregeya. Mubari, along with other principalities to the north, revolted. Kimenyi Getura IV, who came to power around 1750, first sought an alliance with Rwanda to recover these lost territories. He then realized that he would never benefit from an alliance with Rwanda, for Rwanda, being by far the more powerful, would always have the advantage. He then sought an alliance with Ndorwa’s king, Gahaya II, against Rwanda. Cyilima in Rwanda, hearing of this, dispatched his two sons, Sharangabo and Ndabarasa to the northeast to prevent this alliance by wedging their armies between the two countries. Beginning with this expedition, Ndorwa as a power started to dissolve. When Ndabarasa came to power

2. KAGAME, 1963: 12.
3. KAGAME, 1951: 41.
5. The reign of Gahaya II overlapped those of Ntare IV and Machwa in Nkole (1699-1755, according to Karugire), that of Kimenyi Getura V (1750-1800, according to D’Arianoff) and that of Kigeri Ndabarasa (1768-1792, according to Vansina). The dates 1720-1760 are simply a reasonable guess based on these three sets of dates for neighboring kings.
6. MORRIS : 17.
under the name of Kigeri, he continued to dispatch military invasions against Ndorwa. The large majority of traditions retained by the Rwandan royal court about Ndorwa have to do with these expeditions and this period during which Gahaya II Ka Muzora was defeated by Kigeri Ndabarasa.

This phase, because of the famous victory by Rwanda, seems to dominate the entire spectrum of events associated with Ndorwa's tradition. Whenever a Murari or Gahaya is mentioned, it is assumed that he lived during this second phase, and an attempt is made to relate him, in one way or another to the Rwandan kings, Kigeri or Cyilima.

And when Nyabingi is evoked in the context of the names of Murari and Gahaya, it is automatically assumed that this Murari or Gahaya is the one defeated by Rwanda. There is no conclusive evidence, however, that Nyabingi or anyone having to do with Nyabingi tradition, were contemporary with this phase of Ndorwa history. The Murari and Gahaya with whom most all of the names and places associated with Nyabingi, and which are evoked in her worship, seem rather to be associated with yet another and later phase of Ndorwa history. In other words, there seems to have been a third phase, during which a Murari, and perhaps a Gahaya reigned. Very little information has ever been published about this third cycle of Bashambo history; yet it is with reference to this phase, that all the ritual symbols utilized in the Nyabingi worship may be given historical identity.

VI

Most of Ndorwa's traditions which attempt to account for what happened after the death of Gahaya II say, in one way or another, that the kingdom, along with its royal regalia and its ruling family, entirely disappeared. The reason for Gahaya's death was the invasion and occupation by Rwandan soldiers. But the Bashambo traditions which tell of Gahaya's death say virtually nothing about the Rwandan invasions. They speak of the dismemberment of the country rather as if Gahaya's sons quarreled among themselves, then set up independent principalities on their own. They say Gahaya, in despair, may have committed suicide, but tell nothing of his death at the hands of the Rwandan soldiers. In short, the traditions seem to disguise the defeat of Ndorwa by Rwanda and attribute the death of Gahaya and decline of the kingdom to causes internal to the royal dynasty; they make the Bashambo responsible for their own fate. They ignore the unglorious defeat of Ndorwa by re-casting the historical reality in a more favorable light.

As a consequence, these traditions neglect saying much about the successors to Gahaya. A few go so far as to recount how Gahaya disowned his sons and buried the royal drum, explicitly denying the continuity of the kingdom. But the kingdom did maintain its continuity, and in actuality, Gahaya did have successors. Though lacking renown, they have not disappeared entirely from the memory of living Bashambo. They are particularly important for understanding the background to the third phase of Ndorwa's history, and for identifying the major figures in Nyabingi ritual.

Gahaya had a number of sons. A lot of people in Northern Rwanda are able to list them, and in general, the list includes the following: Rukari, Kahaya, Kihondwa, Kirenzi, Ruhiri, Mafundo and Rugambagye. Among all of these, two names—Mafundo and Rugambagye—in particular, stand apart from the rest since, except for these two, none of the sons possessed royal drums. Mafundo and Rugambagye, on the other hand, did possess drums and other royal insignia. Mafundo, people say, made his own drum, named Kihoza, and went to rule in

2. Ibid.: 76.
Igara. Rugambagye, alone among all the sons, received the symbols of royal regalia from Gahaya.

These symbols of kingship passed through a number of hands. Three persons who came to possess the royal regalia, at different times, were named Rubunda, Rukongyi and Nyakajunga. There is not a great amount of information about these figures, and in fact they appear unrelated except for one thing: they are all descendants of Rugambagye—the same Rugambagye who received custody of the royal drum from Gahaya before his death. It is with reference to this family of Rugambagye that one may follow the fate of those who perpetuated the Bashambo royal tradition and also confirm the continuity of the royal lineage, from the death of Gahaya II to the emergence—half a century later—of Murari, son of Nyakajunga, who attempted to re-establish in the Mutara, the right of the royal Bashambo lineage to rule.

A number of different sources help to confirm the historical identity of Rubunda, Rukongyi and Nyakajunga as members of the Bashambo royal lineage after Gahaya. Kagame has recorded traditions specifying Rubunda and Rukongyi as successors of Gahaya. A number of other sources confirms this affinity between Gahaya and Rubunda. Delmas has written that a certain Rubumba, one of the sons of Gahaya, governing Ndorwa around 1780, was killed by Kigeri Ndabarasa on his lands near Gatsibo annexed by Rwanda. Pauwels refers to Rubundo as son of Gahaya, and Nicolet names a Rubunda as a successor to Gahaya in the areas subsequently occupied by the Bene Kihondwa, in Bweishekatwa and the Bene Kahaya in Bwera. As for Nyakajunga, some sources describe him as a servant, others as a son of Gahaya. In all cases he is a recipient, like Rubunda, of a royal drum and seems to have ruled in the area of Ndorwa sometime after the death of Rubunda and Rukongyi.

The proper place in history for these three figures—Rubunda, Rukongyi and Nyakajunga—is at first glance confusing. Rubunda, according to Kagame, succeeded Gahaya, as did Rukongyi. However, according to a genealogy cited by Bigirumwami, Rubunda should be an ancestor of Murari, father of Gahaya. According to Pauwels, Rukongyi as well as Nyakajunga should be ancestors of Murari. One hears frequently, however, the reverse: Nyakajunga, mwana wa Gahaya ‘Nyakajunga, son of Gahaya’; and most myths of Nyakajunga say he is descended from Gahaya, son of Murari.

Put in their proper historical context, this confusion disappears. The three figures lived between the second and third phases of Ndorwa history. They lived between the demise of Gahaya II, whose death marked the end of one phase, and the emergence of a Murari, during the reign of Yuhi Gahindiro, whose appearance marks the first of a third phase. These persons may be identified with reference to either of two cycles of Bashambo kings, each cycle containing identical names of Gahaya and Murari. Rubunda like Rukongyi and Nyakajunga, was descendant of one cycle of kings, and ancestor to the next.

Some forty of fifty years elapsed between the death of Gahaya II and the emergence of Murari. Presumably Gahaya II was killed during or shortly before the reign of Kigeri Ndabarasa. Ndabarasa reigned, approximately, between 1760 and 1790. He was succeeded by Mibambwe Sentabyo, who died unexpectedly after only five years of rule. At Mibambwe’s death, the sole legitimate successor
was a young child, Yuhi Gahindiro. By the time that Murari made his presence known to Rwanda as a successor to the Bashambo royal dynasty and a potential aspirant to power in Ndorwa, Yuhi Gahindiro was no longer an infant. This must have been 15 years after Gahindiro came to power. If he became mwami around 1800,² the presence of Murari as a claimant to the right to rule the patrimony of his ancestors could not have been prior to 1815.

At this time, Murari, descendant of Rubunda and Nyakajunga, arrived in the Mutara from the northwest,³ accompanied by a number of Bashambo with their cattle. According to popular tradition, they established their principal court in the environs of a hill named Bukire. To the east of Bukire, toward the communes of Muhura and Gituza, in striking contrast to the dry plains, is a cluster of lush vegetation surrounding a mineral spring. People refer to these springs as Nyiragahaya. The hill rising just to the south from the springs is known as Rya Murari. Large ramparts made of earth and possibly cattle dung surround the upper areas of the hill. It is here where Murari is said to have held his court.

The Rwanda court reacted violently to the presence of this Murari, fearing the resurgence of an old enemy on their northern borders. Two favorites of Yuhi Gahindiro’s court, Rugaju and Marara, entered a contest (gahiga) to see who, in an invasion of Bukire, would be the first to vanquish ‘Murari the Muhima’.⁴ The Banyarwanda forces, stimulated by this contest, overwhelmed the small contingent of Bashambo. Marara became the first to reach Murari, and he received, as his reward, the area of Bukire as a personal fief. Living in this area, just to the north of Bukire, were the Bagina, who had aided Marara’s Rwandan army to defeat the Bashambo. The Bagina, in fact, are thought to have killed Murari in this battle, hence the common phrase: ‘the Bagina who killed Murari’. Marara received command of the Bagina as well, and organized them into a new Rwandan militia.

Murari had a son, Gahaya, who never came to power in Bukire. When Rwanda attacked, some say that Gahaya was killed in Kigezi. Others say he escaped, fleeing with the supporters of a remarkable woman, Nyabingi, said to have been the sister of Murari. Nyabingi lived, people say, at Nyiragahaya, while Murari lived at Rya Murari, and Murari often sought her counsel. Until recently, Banyarwanda and Bakiga from Ruhengeri and Byumba came to the Mutara to make offerings at the springs of Nyiragahaya, the abandoned residence of Nyabingi at Bukire.

The history of Murari at Bukire, the third and last phase of Ndorwa’s history, has left for posterity a cast of characters, genealogies, places and events. These names, their relationships, events and a few places are familiar to many of the Bakiga and Banyarwanda, especially the representatives of Nyabingi’s spirit; but

1. A famous rebel, Semugaza, who had plotted but failed to overthrow Mibambwe, exiled himself in Ndorwa just after Yuhi Gahindiro became mwami. Yuhi Gahindiro pardoned Semugaza later, and permitted him to return; but this must have been much later, since it could not have been before Yuhi was capable of exercising authority on his own. It was possibly fifteen years after Semugaza had left for Ndorwa. Mugari could not have come to power before the departure of Semugaza’s forces since they would have posed a considerable opposition to him. This helps to date Murari’s bid for power in Bukire (I wish to thank Abbé Kagame for allowing me to consult a manuscript on the history of Rwanda in which I found, in considerable detail, the history of Semugaza and accounts for Rwanda’s invasion into Ndorwa, during the reign of Yuhi Gahindiro. The section from which information was taken was numbered 292).

2. VANSINA: 56.

3. The place of Nyakajunga’s death, Kizinga, is to the northwest, and presumably Murari and Nyakajunga came southeast with their cattle from Kyanamira, Burambira and Maziba, crossing the present Rwandan-Ugandan border to Kizinga. Murari continued in the same direction to Bukire.

for the most part, their true historical context no longer gives meaning to these names, genealogies and encounters. They are now scattered fragments of a past, but this past is no longer relevant to their significance. They have been cast adrift from their historical moorings and become, instead, sacred utterances and verbal gestures, meant to evoke the visitation of a particular and powerful deity, Nyabingi.

The characters—Murari, Gahaya, Rubunda and Nyakajunga—have been recruited out of their historical context for ritual ceremony. It is within this ceremony that these names have been so faithfully preserved. The genealogies which relate these characters to each other (Murari wa Nyakajunga, Nyabingi wa Nyakajunga, Nyagajunga, mwana wa Gahaya, Gahaya ha Murari wa Nyakajunga) have also been faithfully preserved as formal expressions. But they too are uprooted from the historical tradition which has formed the relationships, and have been re-integrated into a new context: ritual expressions for evoking the spirit of Nyabingi. Events, likewise, have been preserved in expressions such as: ‘the Bagina who killed Murari’. The events, like the cast of characters, have become expressions frozen within the context of ritual discourse, and divested of any historical import. In a sense, history has been converted into liturgy, events have become the lexicon of a ritual.

In another sense, however, structure has not entirely obscured history. Even if the ritual itself disregards its explicit historical inspiration, the fact that the names occur together, within a single ritual context, provides a clue for giving these diverse expressions an historical place and time. Once an overall picture of Ndarwa’s history has been reconstructed, and distinct phases have been defined by specific events and names (as this paper has attempted to do) the elements in the ritual liturgy can be assigned place within one of these historical moments in the spectrum of Ndarwa’s traditions.

Nyakajunga, Nyabunyana, Murari and Gahaya, the Bagina clan, the places Muhura and Mpororo, all serve in the liturgy of Nyabingi worship, laden with sacred meaning. These very same names and events in which they take part, occur as well in the third phase of Ndarwa’s history, as this paper has tried to outline it. The simultaneous occurrence of these names and events as elements of liturgy and as critical features of a distinct phase of Ndarwa’s history, would suggest the following conclusion: Nyabingi as a religious power and the worship of this goddess has had its historical origin during the brief reign of Murari, the last of the royal Bashambo kings, ruling at Bukire.

VII

We can now ask two separate questions concerning the relationship between history and ritual expression. The first poses a purely historical problem: what does it mean for the chronology of a cult when a large number of its ritual statements can be related to a specific set of historical events? It seems natural that within these events, one should seek the cult’s origin. In the case of the cult of Nyabingi, specifically, one should expect that the origin of reverence for Nyabingi’s powers is to be found at Bukire.

The traditions that have associated Nyabingi with Gahaya II or with Ruhinda, the travelling Muchwezi prince, founder of Karagwe, or with Kitami, the amazon princess who ruled over a country made up exclusively of women, do not seem to have much historical value. Nyabingi may very well have been the name of a spirit honoured by individual Bashombo families, prior to Murari’s rule at Bukire. Clearly, however, the Nyabingi worshipped by Banyarwanda and Bakiga today refers to the woman or spirit among the Bashombo who lived in the Mutara during the reign of Yuhi Gahindiro in Rwanda.
The second question poses a more theoretical problem: what can one say about the validity of ritual expressions as authentic historical statements? Ritual, among all forms of cultural expression, has often been considered the least reliable of all cultural repositories for historically valid information. The example of Nyabingi suggests this is not true. Though the historical context has been lost in the use of these expressions in ritual, the authenticity of these statements cannot be challenged.

Certain expressions (in particular, the names of Gahaya, Murari, and Nyakajunga arranged in varying sequences) which may appear in ritual circumstances, seemed to be logically inconsistent. Though incompatible for the critical and logical intellect, within the ritual, these expressions endured without distortion. It may be the case that ritual behavior, and liturgy, is by definition illogical and irrational. This, however, does not discredit it as a source for historical information. If anything, because it is perfectly free of a critical perspective on historical plausibility, it is particularly fitting for serving as a repository for the odd allusions and reflections which remain true to their historical context. The expressions that become part of ritual discourse, are, in a sense, semantically frozen. The interest of liturgy is in using the same—exactly the same—objects of discourse over and over again. It is the structure that such ritual expressions constitute, and not their sense, that is important to the potency of a ritual exercise.

In a totemic system, as Lévi-Strauss has described it, it is the structure of elements, or the relations among the elements, and not the significance that each one of them carries individually, which animates the religious intellect. Likewise, the elements of ritual expression lose the historical context which gave it meaning, and become like clichés, outside of history. Like the elements of a totemic system, these elements of ritual are bound to a synchronic existence. And it is for this very reason, because such elements are used as objects in an unchanging discourse, that these expressions can be so faithful to the historical information they carry.

The history that such element of ritual discourse tell is a fragmented one. Historical context is sacrificed for authenticity. It is the duty of the researcher, with conjecture, artful guessing and experimentation, to match the expressions with the historical context—to match the structure with the event.

1. It has often been assumed that the more the form by which a tradition is transmitted is oriented to a religious or social end, the more the historical validity is compromised. Vansina, however, has noticed that traditions transmitted with the aid of mnemonic devices (and ritual expressions clearly serve as such devices) may suffer less distortion than traditions transmitted via other means. J. VANSINA, Oral Tradition (Chicago, 1965): 41.