Réponse à Pierre Smith
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CORRESPONDANCE


Pierre Smith's paper on “l'efficacité des interdits” is mainly a long and interesting account of the implications and significances of ideas of ritual prohibitions (imiziro) among the Rwanda of east central Africa. But it also takes note of comparative data, including some of my own published references to apparently similar notions and usages among the culturally and territorially not very distant Nyoro of western Uganda, among whom I carried out research in the early 1950's. Smith is more than a little critical of the conclusions I drew a quarter of a century ago, so I welcome the opportunity to respond briefly to his criticisms.

First, a relatively minor point. I am censured by Pierre Smith (p. 9) for having remarked, in a brief paragraph on Nyoro “clanship” in a book on the Nyoro State (Beattie 1971: 12), that the verb okuzira,1 in Bunyoro generally used of people's regard for the specific objects or conditions ritually associated with their particular clans, means “to respect or avoid”. So to render it is, according to P. S., “la traduction la plus entachée des préjugés ethnologiques”. Well, there is certainly a great deal more to be said about the Nyoro verb okuzira and its associated noun omuziro (pl. emiziro) than I said about them in the context referred to. But, in that context, these terms are associated with the ideas of “respect” (okutina, a verb which connotes fear as well as respect), and of “avoidance” (of too close contact with one's clan's omuziro, by eating it if it is edible, for example). This is the context, and these are the senses, in which the terms okuzira and omuziro are most commonly used in Bunyoro.2 I don't quite see why I should be charged with so “tainted” a prejudice for saying so.

1. Or kusira. In what follows I retain the initial vowel where it would normally occur in Nyoro usage (i.e. before vowels and substantives).
2. Davis (1938: 118) translates (o)muziro as “tabooed animal or thing, totem”, and she adds “each clan has its own muziro”. Allowance being made for the lexicographer’s somewhat eclectic vocabulary, her definition is essentially correct. In the 1950’s a Nyoro

But Pierre Smith brings his biggest guns to bear on my various references to the Nyoro concept of *amahano* (or *mahano*). The same word is also found in Rwanda where, like *imiziro*, it applies to the abnormal, the unusual, and (thus) to the potentially dangerous. But according to P. S. it also implies for Rwandans an *ominous* quality; *amahano* are “présages funestes, alarmants” (p. 21). P. S. thinks that the sense of the term in Bunyoro “ne paraît en rien différent” (p. 22) from that which it possesses in Rwanda. And in support of this opinion he quotes the Nyoro author J. W. Nyakatura (1970: 4-6) who lists under the heading *amahano* a number of prohibitions which are identical with those listed in Rwanda as *imiziro*.

In fact, however, the concept of *amahano* in Bunyoro is not quite the same as Smith represents it as being in Rwanda. In Bunyoro, *amahano* is (despite the word’s plural form I use the singular advisedly; see below) thought of, and spoken of, not merely as a list of prohibitions (*emiziro* or *emizizo*), however “portentous”—though certainly there is some overlap of meaning here—but rather as itself a potentially dangerous power; not something “presaged”, but present and inhering in these prohibited conditions and events themselves. Nyoro speak of *amahano* as though it were a substance, not just a quality of certain things and conditions. So represented, it “appears” (*okuzoka*), “falls” (*okugwa*), may be “thrown away” (*okunagwa*), “finished” (*okumara*), or “return” (*okugaruka*) to a person who has been relieved of it. I cannot recall ever having heard these verbs applied in Bunyoro to *emiziro*, which, although associated with *amahano* as one cause or occasion of it (hence the possible application of the latter term, as for example by Nyakatura, to the various ritual prohibitions called *imiziro* in Rwanda), are not themselves identical with it. (It might be added that later in his book Nyakatura himself (1970: 25)—or his Nyoro translator—defines *amahano* as “ritual danger”, which can be “taken away” from a person affected by it.)

I have myself drawn attention to the danger of reifying the conceptual structures of other cultures and treating them as “real” existents (Beattie 1960: 150). But in the present case the reification seems to be unambiguously on the Nyoro side. Nyoro do not merely talk about *amahano* as a kind of substance or power; in their ritual they treat it as such. As in some other interlacustrine Bantu cultures, it is said that *amahano* may be “finished” by sexual intercourse, either the act itself or one symbolizing it—the latter in Bunyoro by grasping the shoulders of a person of the opposite sex. One or other, or both, of these methods are recorded in various Nyoro texts. Thus, according to some accounts, in initiation into the Nyoro spirit mediumship cult the initiate is required to “finish off the *amahano*” by copulating with a senior initiator (Beattie 1957: 158-)

who asked another, “oziraki?”, “what do you zira?”, would at once be understood to be enquiring about his interlocutor’s clan membership—perhaps in the context of a proposed marriage.

3. *Emizizo*, not *emiziro* (both words have the same root), was the name given by one informant to such a general list of prohibitions, possibly to distinguish them from *emiziro*, with their primary reference to “clan” avoidances.
for a comparable institution in another part of the interlacustrine region, see Cory 1955: 936). Copulation, actual or symbolic, is also prescribed in the disposal of the amahano caused by death (orufu) (Beattie 1961: 179). The theme recurs in the context of the complex series of rites associated with the birth of twins, and with some other abnormal kinds of birth, the general term for all of which is amahasa (the same or a similar term occurs in a number of Bantu languages). Nyoro themselves explicitly assimilate the idea of amahasa to that of amahano, amahasa being described as “the amahano of twins”, amahano g’abarongo; the twins themselves are called abarongo. Ritual copulation, actual or simulated, with strangers who should not know its purpose, is also prescribed for the twins’ parents, “to finish off the amahano (or amahasa)” (Beattie 1962: 9).

At a certain point in the ritual the twins’ mother is required to testify that she has not been unfaithful to her husband: “If I have,” she swears, “may my amahano return to me and kill me!” (amahano gange gangarukire nfwe) (ibid.: 8).

In all these (and in other) contexts it seems plain that for Nyoro the denotations of the terms emiziro (specifically clan “ritual avoidances”, but might be more generally applied to other things or conditions which are ritually proscribed), and amahano (the dangerous potency associated, in varying degree, with breach of the avoidances sometimes listed as emiziro or emizizo), are conceptually distinct. This is so even though in certain contexts (as in Nyakatura’s list) the one term may stand for the other.

Next, I am charged with making, in my discussion of amahano in its political aspect (Beattie 1971: 117), “un saut surprenant” (p. 22). First, the word amahano, which I have hitherto treated as plural, is “suddenly” treated as singular.

But I have always treated it as singular. I referred to amahano as “it” in my first published mention of the concept (Beattie 1957), and again in my 1960 paper on “Mahano”, and I have continued to do so ever since. This conforms, I believed, and still believe, with the way in which Nyoro themselves think and act in the matter. For them, the term amahano, in most of the contexts in which they use it, denotes not “things”, but a “thing”. Several Nyoro texts recorded in the 1950’s refer to “the thing [not ‘things’] called amahano”, “ekintu [not ‘ebintu’], ekyetwa [not ‘ebyetwa’] amahano”. Despite its plural form, and notwithstanding that it is sometimes used as a plural (as by Nyakatura, quoted above), it soon became evident to me that most Nyoro, in most contexts, conceived it unambiguously in singular terms. It may be worth remarking in this connection that there are in the Nyoro language a number of words with the “ama-” (generally “plural”) prefix, which seem to denote what we would regard as a “singular” concept or category; amaia (milk), amaizi (water), amagezi (cleverness), and amakune (politeness) are examples.

However my “sudden” treatment of amahano as “singular” is not the main indictment. From the time of my “surprising leap” in 1971, I present amahano as “a special mystical power, attached to the Nyoro kingship, and conveyed by
the king as though by contagion to his ritual chiefs, this delegation of power increasing their *mahano*. 5 In short, Beattie "nous fabrique ici du *mana*" (p. 22). So, according to P. S., it may be concluded that "‘le’ *mahano* n’existe pas".

But wait a bit. Even if *amahano* does not exist for Pierre Smith, there is ample evidence, some of it cited above, that the concept of it does exist for Nyoro. And I have emphasized that its political context is only *one* of the contexts in which it is culturally relevant. "*Mahano* is associated with many other conditions and objects besides the political authority centred on the kingship" (Beattie 1971: 118). But even *within* the political context, P. S. somewhat misrepresents what I said. "For Beattie, orthodox functionalist," he writes (p. 23), "the symbolic and ritual aspects of the Nyoro kingship have for their sole (*‘seule’*) function the expression of political relations and social values." I certainly never said this. In fact I asserted that although Nyoro royal ritual is "chiefly" about the notions of power and authority, "it certainly has other significances too" (Beattie 1971: 104). And a few pages further on I refer to (only) *one* of the functions of ritual as being "to express symbolically important social values" (*ibid.*: 121). I doubt whether these disclaimers are enough to absolve me from what I take to be the very serious charge of being a "fonctionnaliste orthodoxe". But for the record, I have always thought, and have said frequently and at length, that "functional" analysis is only one part of the anthropologist’s task.

P. Smith may be right in saying that I somewhat over-emphasized the link between the concept of *amahano* and the theme of political authority. But that there is a close connection between the two seems plain. The Nyoro writer P. Bikunya (himself a former county chief) does more than merely hint at the association when he writes that the chief who is honoured by being awarded a "crown" by the king is, and is seen to be, "*wa mahano*", "a person of *mahano*" (Bikunya 1927: 51). The connection was reaffirmed in numerous discussions. It is surely not necessary to look as far as Polynesia to discover the notion that kings have, in virtue of their quality of being "extra-ordinary", a special power which may be conceived as dangerous as well as beneficial, and which can be transmitted in some form (cf. the medieval cure in England for "the king’s evil") to others.

After thus disposing of the Nyoro concept of *amahano*, Pierre Smith turns to the Polynesian "theory" of *mana*, something which, following Lévi-Strauss, he seems also to be eager to demolish. The conceived "spontaneous efficacy of the symbolic act," he claims (p. 23), dispenses with the need for "the intervention of a special mediating force", such as *mana*. Here P. S. certainly touches on the very foundations of ritual, but the "two incompatible models" with which he presents us are perhaps not quite as "incompatible" as he thinks. "Either", he writes (my italics), "the fact of touching the chief’s head draws its negative efficacy from the symbolic quality of the act, that is to say, from its symbolic

5. I hope that here and elsewhere the author will forgive my no doubt clumsy attempts at translation.
interpretation transmuted into an effective cause; or it draws it from the contagious force which is supposed to be contained in the chief's head" (ibid.). But isn't this disjunction a false one? The matter is perhaps not so simple. It may indeed be argued, as I (and of course others) have argued (see Beattie 1966 and 1970, for example), that in the last resort ritual does derive its presumed efficacy from the symbolic quality of the ritual act. But one cannot, so to speak, draw a line around the act, isolating it both from its agent and from its object. It is the chief's head which is touched, and it is the commoner who is affected by touching it, and for the supposed effect to be produced, something special about the chief, whether and in whatever measure that "something" is reified, must be conceived to be a necessary if not a sufficient condition for the production of that effect. And since it is believed to have consequences, that "something" can hardly be represented otherwise than as some kind of "force".

I do not think that Smith's suggestion that people may come "no longer to believe in the automatic efficacy of symbolic action, but continue to believe in the [ritual] efficacy of the chief" (or whatever) (p. 24), is very plausible, presuming as it does that the two "beliefs" are somehow alternative choices. The first of these beliefs is surely no more than the inchoate and unarticulated assumption, which underlies all ritual, that symbolic acts may be causally effective. It is unlikely to be a consciously-held, "believed in" philosophy. And the second belief (in the ritual efficacy of the chief) is the cultural and symbolic form, or one such form, in which the first underlying and unstated assumption is made manifest.

But enough. This note is not intended as a critique of Pierre Smith's stimulating and important paper. It seeks only to make out the case for the Nyoro concept of amahano as, for Nyoro, something more than merely a synonym, with oracular overtones, for the list of ritual prohibitions known, in the Rwanda and Nyoro languages, as e- (or i-) miziro or emizizo.

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