



## Beliefs and cultural understanding of liquids in Nande society

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### ABSTRACT

*Society implies human beings and their customs. These are such fundamental features as language, beliefs, laws, and so on or, holistically speaking, culture.*

*Nande society may also be known from its culture. There are specific customs that suffice to make Nande people different from other people. One such explaining instance is the cultural understanding of liquids like blood, saliva, mother's milk, semen, and beer. Out of the common and scientific considerations, Nande people have a connotative understanding of these liquids, with respect to their culture.*

### RESUME

*La société suppose les êtres humains et leur culture. Cette dernière comprend des éléments fondamentaux comme la langue, les croyances, les lois, etc.*

*La société Nande se comprend par sa culture. Il existe des valeurs culturelles qui suffisent pour différencier les Nande d'autres peuples. L'une des ces valeurs est le sens culturel des liquides comme le sang, la salive, le lait maternel, le sperme et la bière. À part les considérations scientifiques, les Nande donnent à ces liquides un sens connotatif en rapport avec leur culture.*

### INTRODUCTOIN

Whenever people join, some values occur, and each individual conforms to them. Those values constitute a kind of regulation that everybody has to observe and respect as well. The people and the values which unify them form a society. Broadly put, society is looked at as people who recognize the same laws.

There is some evidence that society is defined in relation to laws. Every social group is therefore established on a set of rules, including cultural beliefs. Then, if there are different societies, there are, of course, different cultures. Thus, culture makes the fund for any social group, and suffices to make a given community different from other societies.

It has been said so far that societies are based on cultures ; in other terms, there is no social group without laws. Then, are those cultures marriageable ? Or is it possible for different social groups to have a universal set of beliefs ?

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The answer to the questions above appears to be negative. Owing to the fact that societies are set on a number of different beliefs, they cannot share the same cultural values. However, some cultural similarities may be observed among different social groups.

This piece of work is carried out with the postulate that Nande people have a kind of culture that makes them different from other societies. Also, as a social group, they recognize a set of beliefs.

From the statement above, this investigation intends to highlight the cultural considerations of liquids in the beliefs of Nande people. These are such liquids as blood, saliva, mother's milk, semen, and beer.

The fulfilment of this study has required an appropriate approach for each of its sections. For the first section, i.e., the definition of the key concepts of the study, the researcher has applied the documentary method. MWITA, J<sup>1</sup>. defines documentation as a method which involves deriving information by carefully studying written documents, or visual information from the sources known as documents. The documents may be written materials such as books, journals, magazines, etc.

In addition, for the second section, i.e., the study of the cultural understanding of liquids by Nande people, the researcher has relied on the participant observation. His involvement in the society under study as well as his recurrent contacts with informants have sustained this investigation.

## **1. REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT CONCEPTS**

### **1.1 Beliefs**

Beliefs are one of characteristics of human beings. They are fundamental features of any social group, i.e., they are part of the everybody life of people.

Reflecting on the understanding of beliefs, HORNBY, A.S<sup>2</sup>., states the following:

*A belief is a strong feeling that something or somebody exists or is true ; confidence that something or somebody is good or right.*

From this quotation, it follows that a belief is one of the components which build up human beings. Broadly speaking, any human being is a whole, and that whole results from the interconnection of different components among which beliefs are worth mentioning.

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<sup>1</sup> MWITA, J., *Fundamentals of Practical Geography*, 2009, p285.

<sup>2</sup> HORNBY, A.S., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. 2006, p122.

Beliefs, as relevant features of individuals, are part and parcel of the customs of any social group. Truly, when people join as a community, there are accepted ways of behaving or doing things that each member must observe and conform to. Thus, people show their attitudes with respect to the customs of their society. The enclosure of beliefs in customs announces the concept culture.

Indeed, culture is a mixture of many elements such as customs, including beliefs, art, considered with regard to a given social group at a particular period of time. In this understanding, HORNBY, A.S<sup>1</sup>., defines culture as the customs and beliefs, arts, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group.

## **1. 2 Society**

When human beings live together, they get involved in different interactions among themselves. They constitute a social group established on a set of customs that each member must respect. With respect to those customs, people grasp a clear cut between what they are required to do and what they should forsake.

To share the above idea, PROCTER, P<sup>2</sup>., defines society in terms of  
*a large group of people who live together in an organized way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the work that needs to be done.*

One obvious factor sustaining this quotation is that society should be understood as people conforming to some customs.

Briefly put, society is thought of as people who share the same customs, including, beliefs, laws, etc. that they respect submissively, regardless of they age or social rank.

## **1. 3 Nande society**

Nande society is geographically located in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), close to the region which is occupied by the great lakes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibidem*, p357.

<sup>2</sup> PROCTER, P., *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995, p1370.

This society is precisely found in the northern part of the province of North-Kivu, in the administrative territories of Beni and Lubero. It occupies a region which spreads on both sides of the equator.

Nande society may also be known from some clear geographical limits. In the East, Rwenzori mountain with Lubilihya stream and the Eduard, the lake which constitutes the frontier between the DRC and Uganda; in the West, the regions occupied by the Bakumu and the Bapiri; in the North, the region occupied by the people known as Bapakombe, Bambuba, Lese and Batalinga; in the South, Rutshuru and Walikale territories.

Nande people speak the same language, Kinande. According to the linguistic classification of languages, Kinande is situated in zone **J**, with its acronym **J42**. Besides, as a Bantu language, it belongs to the bantoid group, a sub-branch of Niger-Congo.

Historically and culturally as well, Nande people are believed to be part and parcel of the Yira tribe. History reveals that Nande and Konzo people once lived together and formed the Kingdom of Kitara in Uganda. Equally, BERGMANS, L<sup>1</sup>, confirms that Nande people originated from the ancient Kingdom of Kitara, i.e., the present Ntoro.

Besides, tradition reveals that people in the Kingdom of Kitara were not peaceful enough given the climatic conditions; they were recurrently ill. So, to get rid of that frequent suffering, some of them decided to leave Uganda; they took the way towards the DRC, these are known as Wanande or Nande people. The remaining group went on living in the original region and confronted the hardship of diseases; they are called Wakonzo or Konzo people.

Since then, the Yira tribe is made up of two linguistically and culturally related sub-groups, Nande and Konzo people. In sum, Nande people are the Yira of the DRC whereas Konzo people are the Yira of Uganda.

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<sup>1</sup> BERGMANS, L., *Les Wanande, l'histoire des Baswagha*. (Tome II), 1970, p6.

## **2. CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS OF LIQUIDS BY NANDE PEOPLE**

One of the most significant components of the culture of Nande people is the value of liquids. In most manifestations of life, liquids are believed to contain vital forces. Thus, to keep those forces permanent, liquids should not be harmed.

The forces that are enclosed in liquids maintain and strengthen life. Broadly put, life is so dear that it should be kept carefully. This is why Nande people protect the forces that are culturally associated with liquids in order to safeguard their life.

However, not all liquids are believed to enclose vital forces. Nande people recognize some liquids only as having power upon human beings. These are such liquids as blood, saliva, mother's milk, semen and beer.

### **2.1 Blood**

PROCTER, P<sup>1</sup>., defines blood as the red liquid that is sent around the body by the heart and carries oxygen and important substances to organs and tissues and removes waste products.

From this definition, it follows that blood is an important device without which human life would be impossible ; and Nande people recognize this truth .

In the cultural context of Nande society, blood constitutes a sacred liquid ; it is in itself the only visible sign of life that no human being can make, but only God . The impossibility of humans to make blood is one of the facts which explain Nande people 's belief in God . They know that humans are able to make too many things, but never a living being. This belief may be felt through the words below, when ZAMENGA, B<sup>2</sup>., states the following:

*Dieu créa le corps de l'homme lequel ne pouvait prendre la  
forme d'homme qu'après y avoir « pompé » du sang  
God created the human body that took the form of man only  
after he had pumped blood in it.*

This quotation sustains Nande people's recognition of the supreme Creature that transcends other creatures, i.e. , God. Thus, it belongs to God only to give life.

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<sup>1</sup> PROCTER, P., *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995, p137.

<sup>2</sup> ZAMENGA, B., *Kindoki, Source des Philosophies et des Religions Africaines*, 1996, p71.

Blood as source of life should not be shed for fear that life may be harmed. People may quarrel, get involved in disputes, and so on, but a single drop of blood may suffice to generate a fight among people or even tribes. And of course there are hard penalties that are associated with the shedding of blood.

In the beliefs of Nande people, blood is a significant means of unity. This is known as “**ekihango**” (from the Nande verb “erihanga” which means ‘to tie’), this means, the pact of blood. This act consists of uniting two individuals by sucking each one’s blood. Thus, the pact of blood unites two persons in the way that the problems of the one engage the personality of the other.

From the understanding above, in the beliefs of Nande people, it derives that blood is sacred and should therefore be safeguarded. This is why Nande people hate and fight criminals at all costs because the latter put an end to life.

### **Saliva**

Saliva, in the understanding of PROCTER, P<sup>1</sup>., is the natural watery liquid that keeps one’s mouth wet and helps to prepare food for digestion. But this view of the concept under discussion here is more scientific than cultural.

Culturally considered, in the beliefs of Nande people, saliva is also a liquid with forces; therefore, it is sacred. Nevertheless, saliva is considered sacred when it is produced by an adult, a wise man, a father, a mother, an uncle or an aunt, the only persons who can bless or curse. Reflecting on the sense of saliva in the contexts of blessing and malediction, ZAMENGA, B<sup>2</sup>., confirms the following:

*La salive sert à bénir mais aussi à maudire. Cela se rencontre dans les relations souvent conflictuelles entre père et fils, entre les aînés et les cadets dans un clan.*

*Saliva is used to bless as well as to curse. This occurs in conflictual relationships between father and son, between elder and younger children within a clan.*

In this respect, saliva has a two-fold cultural meaning, blessing and malediction. But the context in which somebody spits makes these two meanings different. If a father, aunt, etc. spits being angry, his saliva will mean malediction; if he spits being happy, his saliva will mean blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> PROCTER, P., *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995, p125.

<sup>2</sup> ZAMENGA, B., *Kindoki, Source des Philosophies et des Religions Africaines*, 1996, p85.

Blessings are more current than maledictions in Nande society. The commonest way of blessing a person is to spit on his/her open hand by uttering the sentence ‘**Enzok**’ ‘**iyakusagha**’ which means ‘ May the snake be afraid of you’. Here ‘*enzoka*’ (snake) does not mean truly the wild animal known as the snake, but it figuratively means whatever kind of misfortune. Broadly speaking, the above Nande formula of blessing means that the blessed person should not be haunted by any kind of misfortune.

In the light of saliva used to bless people, Nande people believe that it is a symbol of removing every bad luck or suffering from people. In this understanding, this society shares the biblical view of saliva, expressed in the gospel according to John, chapter 9, verse 6 of the New International Bible Society<sup>1</sup>, which reads:

*Having said this, he [Jesus] spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva and put it on the man's eyes.*

This passage illustrates the suffering of a man who was born blind. The man came in contact with Jesus Christ who healed him by using saliva as a means of removing his blindness.

In short, saliva, as viewed by Nande people, carries with it a vital force when produced by specific persons like a father, mother, uncle, aunt, etc. Thus, it is a relevant component of the culture of Nande people.

### **2. 3 Mother's milk**

Generally, mother's milk is known as a soft nourishment that mothers offer to their babies. In other words, it is known from its nutritive values ; and this is the common understanding that people have about it.

However, out of the general understanding of the mother's milk expressed just above, it has a cultural meaning in the beliefs of Nande people. It encloses a vital force that people usually refer to as a means of curing eyeaches.

Sharing this point of view, ZAMENGA, B<sup>2</sup>., states the following :

*En plus de ses valeurs nutritives, le lait est aussi force vitale considérée comme une thérapie, un médicament. Le lait permettrait d'éliminer les corps étrangers dans l'œil.  
In addition to its nutritive values, milk is also a vital force considered as a therapy, a medicine. Milk would remove strange objects from the eye.*

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<sup>1</sup> INTERNATIONAL BIBLE SOCIETY, *The Holy Bible*, 1984, p930.

<sup>2</sup> ZAMENGA, B., *Kindoki, Source des Philosophies et des Religions Africaines*, 1996, p82.

From this consideration of milk, it follows that not only babies but also grown up people recognize the effectiveness of the mother's milk, especially when they use it as a therapy likely to heal them from eyeaches.

Besides, the mother's milk establishes the endless authority of the mother upon her posterity. It is obvious that people descending from a given mother remain submissive to her, regardless of their ages or social positions. Milk, in this context, gives power to the mother over her offspring in that if a child of her own makes her angry, she may easily curse him by lifting her breast. Nande people know this way of cursing as "**erisumb'erivere**" which means "**to lift the breast**".

Briefly speaking, in the beliefs of Nande people, the mother's milk is a kind of medicine that they use independently of their ages. It also makes a strong bond between the mother and her children, and defines the mother's supremacy upon her posterity.

#### 2.4 **Semen**

Semen, as defined by PROCTER, P<sup>1</sup>., is a thick sticky liquid containing sperm which is produced by men and male animals as a result of sexual activity. Thus, it follows that the productive cells are the sperms or spermatozoa. They are above all the most important ingredients in the act of procreation.

In Nande society, people talk less about semen since it is associated with sexual matters ; and everything involving sex is considered a taboo in their culture. Yet semen is principally the first vital force which makes procreation possible.

In the beliefs of Nande people, semen is sacred. Sperm is at all costs considered as a human being whose life needs protection as well. This is why Nande men, including young boys in puberty, are instructed that semen should not be poured in any place apart from the natural area where it grows to procreate.

Life is enclosed in semen; it must therefore be safeguarded. Nande people believe that whoever pours his semen in an inappropriate place irritates the ancestors and God who transcends all creatures. As a result, that man may become barren.

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<sup>1</sup> PROCTER, P., *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995, p1290.

The above considerations of semen underlie a number of interdictions. And, of course, most interdictions in Nande society are associated with sex. For instance, it is forbidden for a man to sit with his mother-in-law for fear that he may think he is close to his everyday wife and behave accordingly.

As previously said, most interdictions are associated with sex. With respect to those interdictions, Nande people are instructed to master their feelings; this is part of sexual education in Nande society.

## **2.5. Beer**

While all the liquids discussed above are of the human origin, i.e., secreted by human beings, beer is a sacred liquid which appears as a gift that nature offers to people.

The cultural beer of Nande people is known as "omunzenze", a kind of banana beer with sorghum used as leaven. It consists of brewing ripe bananas and adding pounded sorghum to make fermentation possible.

"Omumzenze", banana beer, is a symbol of strong solidarity. Nande people drink together and share "omunzenze" in a wooden cup called "ekikeke" that moves from mouth to mouth. This is an eloquent proof of the absence of segregation.

The absence of segregation among Nande people may be noticed through the song below that they perform while sharing their drink:

*Omunzenzy' akasiha ndeke, valume!  
Kundy' akanywa kw'avateke n'avera, kundy' akanywa kw'avakali  
n'avana, omunzenze!  
Banana beer is very sweet, dear men!  
It is drunk by both the rich and the poor, it is drunk by both  
Women and children, Banana beer!*

This song displays the theme of solidarity, a virtue that people should embody. People sharing "omunzenze" hate segregation. They invite others to partake of their joy, regardless of their rank or age.

Furthermore, beer makes a tight link between the living and the dead. Ancestors need honour from their living descendants so that the latter may live peacefully.

Reflecting on this idea, MULAGO, G.V<sup>1</sup>., writes:

*Les défunts veulent qu'on entretienne leurs tombes, qu'on*

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<sup>1</sup> MULAGO, G.V., *La Religion Traditionnelle des Bantu et leur Vision du Monde*, 1973, p31.

*les gratifie de malafu (wine) et que de temps à autre, on célèbre la fête de morts, une espèce de commémoration des défunts du clan. En retour de ces honneurs, ils donnent aide et protection à leurs descendants(...)*

*The dead want that their graves be kept clean, that they be gratified with wine and that sometimes a memorial be celebrated in honour of the deceased of the clan. As a result from those honours, they [the dead] will help and protect their descendants (...)*

The mutual relationship among the members of the clan, including the dead and the living, is so strong that Nande people observe it as an aspect of their beliefs; and the symbol associated with it is the use of "omunzenze" in memorial ceremonies.

Beer is therefore an important and sacred liquid in Nande society. It unites people, i.e., it is a fund of solidarity. It also links the living to the deceased, especially when used during the memorials in honour of the dead of the clan.

## CONCLUSION

This piece of work has been conducted with some evidence that Nande society is set upon a number of cultural values that can make it sound different from other societies.

The investigation has given much emphasis to the cultural understanding of liquids throughout the beliefs of Nande people. It has been observed that Nande people have, out of the common and scientific considerations, different understandings of liquids; and this piece of work has attempted to show the contexts in which liquids bear cultural connotations.

With respect to the cultural sense given to the liquids treated throughout this paper, Nande people are tightly bound to their cultural norms related to the liquids. For instance, shedding human blood is always regarded as a crime; pouring beer on the ground, if that is not required in a cultural ritual, is observed as something wrong.

The postulate that Nande people have cultural values and beliefs which are specific to them is worth maintaining. Apart from some possibility of having cultural similarities, Nande people give a connotative sense to the liquids mentioned through this work, in relation to their culture.

This paper cannot pretend to be exhaustive. It is simply an attempt in researches conducted in the area of culture. It has taken one aspect of Nande culture, the cultural understanding of liquids. So, any other researcher interested in Nande culture may carry out further investigation.

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