RUNYANKORE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Runyankore is a Bantu language in the Niger-Congo family. The language is variously known as Nyankore, Nyankole, Nkole, Orunyankore or Orunyankole. It is however known and referred to as Orunyankore by the Banyankore people. The languages that are closely related to Runyankore include, Rukiga, Runyoro and Rutoro (all spoken in the western part of Uganda), Runyambo and Ruhaya spoken in Tanzania, Runundi of Burundi, and Runyarwanda of Rwanda. Majority of these languages are largely mutually intelligible some going up to 94% similarities. In 1955 Runyankore was officially classified with Rukiga as variants of the same language under the umbrella name Runyankore-Rukiga. The two varieties use the same orthography. In recognition of the closeness that exists among the four varieties of Runyankore, Rukiga, Rutoro, and Runyoro, and in an attempt to facilitate work, business relations and teaching using these languages as a medium of communication, a standardized version named Runyakatara that is being taught in higher institutions of learning was developed around 1990 and it accounts for 22% of Ugandan population, making it the most widely spoken African language in Uganda after Swahili.

The Banyankore engage in numerous artistic activities involving music, literature, sports, weaving, and dancing. Many events taking place in society are expressed in the form of poetry. In the evenings and other times children and parents share stories depicting events and episodes in society. Epic poetry is/was composed to celebrate raids of various kingdoms, to eulogize successful and popular leaders and, as a cultural expression of traditions, customs and education episodes to the community members. Songs were composed to praise the warriors, their valor, and the invincibility of their weapons. There were also songs for praising cattle to the effect that they were objects of beauty and joy forever, today, songs and epics are still composed for a greater part of the said reasons. In doing this, the storytellers, performers and dancers use various parts of the body as well as instruments such as flutes, lyres, and drums. Banyankore are also known for engaging in activities such as making agricultural implements including hoes, sickles, axes, and knives; weapons such as spears, bows and arrows, and clubs of hardwood; making pottery, weaving mats and baskets, using iron, copper, and brass to make jewelry including necklaces, bracelets, head rings, and anklets. This craftsmanship is a source of income for many families.

There is an important cultural tradition among the Banyankore called Entereko that is more common in upcountry regions and villages. This tradition revolves around the traditional Banyankore process of brewing beer where ripe bananas are mixed with water and grass to squeeze out the juice, sorghum is then added to the juice before getting fermented for a few days. Traditionally, when someone brewed beer (Tonto and Omuramba), they reserved some for their neighbors and one or two days after the beer was brewed, a celebration called Entereko would be held to distribute the beer. Entereko is an important opportunity for neighbors to meet and discuss important issues affecting their area and group-a place where important decisions concerning families and individuals were made. The tradition of family gathering has been complemented by Christmas holiday celebrations that are usually held upcountry with all family members together. Thus, the concept of WE is/was very important among the Banyankore. Various ceremonies are carried out among the Banyankore some of which involve joyous occasions, while others may be sad occasions. The joyous ceremonies involve weddings, birth of children, dedication of children, commemoration of important events, rites of passage and receipt of visitors. For most of these ceremonies, there is eating, drinking, speech making, singing, and dancing. The celebration also included a lot of traditional music and dance form called Ekyiragururo. Staple foods for Banyankore such as millet known as Oburo, bananas-Ebitokye, potatoes-Ebitakuri and cassava-Muhogo are also abundant. Beans, peas, Eshawe (made out of ghee), groundnuts, various greens and various meats, chicken are also common on Banyankore diet and can be found in many homesteads.

Generally, children among the Banyankore are welcomed and warmly treated by all their relatives. All children belong to the community and are a responsibility of older members as far as discipline, provision of basic needs and guidance. Bataka munyambe is an expression meaning neighborhood watch. The naming of a child is carried out immediately after birth or after the seclusion period. A number of factors influence the type of name that is given to a child: parental experiences, the timing of a child’s birth, the place of birth, and ancestral and other family member’s names. Both boys and girl children play together, guard calves, look after animals-cows, goats but most importantly engage in games and activities related to warfare; marriage; herding; building; wrestling; shooting at a target with arrows and making toys out of clay, wires, and other materials; boxing; swimming; playing hide and seek; dancing; and throwing objects. Children activities have been encroached on by formal education which calls for spending long hours at school but games and sports equally form part of the school curriculum which allows time to play though in a different context.
WHO ARE THE BANYANKORE (PEOPLE AND HISTORY)

Banyankore trace their ancestors back to two different ethnic groups, the Bairu-mainly agriculturists and the Bahima subgroup-mainly pastoralists. Both groups migrated from central Africa to what is now Uganda between the years 500 and 1000AD. The two groups formed a relationship based on trade. The Bairu, although smaller in number than the Bairu, were socially dominant as they only, owned cattle. However, this relationship has enormously changed and today, cattle rearing and agricultural practice is done by both the Bairu and Bahima. The two groups formed the Ankole (also referred to as Nkole/ Nkore) kingdom in present-day western Uganda. Originally, Ankole was known as Kaaro-Karungi and the word Nkore is said to have been adopted during the 17th century following the devastating invasion of Kaaro-Karungi by Chawaali, the then Omukama of Bunyoro-Kitara.

The word Ankole was introduced by British colonial administrators to describe the bigger kingdom which was formed by adding to the original Nkore, the former independent kingdoms of Igo, Sheema, Buluweja and parts of Mpororo (Runyankore is native language in these areas). Ankole kingdom was one of four kingdoms that make up what is now Uganda. The ruler of the kingdom was called Omugabe. Below the Omugabe was a prime minister called Enganzi and local chiefs known as Abakuru b’ebiya. The Banyankore traditional social structure emphasized clan loyalty as opposed to a central government scheme. Banyankore traditionally lived in villages and practiced both migratory animal husbandry and subsistence farming with a shift to an emphasis on cash crops such as coffee and cotton in contemporary times. Since Uganda was colonized by the British, it has been difficult for them to reinstate their form of traditional government. The kingdom was formally abolished in 1967 by Ugandan government under president Apollo Milton Obote and has not been restored since.

Like other Bantu groups, the origins of the Banyankore could be traced to the Congo region. Legends hold that the first occupant of Ankole was Ruhanga (the creator), who is believed to have come from heaven to rule the earth. Ruhanga is believed to have come with his three sons Kairu, Kakama and Kahima. There is a popular legendary story about how Ruhanga gave a test to determine which of his sons would become the heir. The test is said to have been that of keeping milk-filled pots on their laps throughout the night. At the end of it all, the youngest son, Kakama, is said to have passed the test followed by Kahima and then Kairu. Judging from the performance in the test, Ruhanga is said to have decreed that Kairu and Kahima would serve their brother Kakama. Thereafter he went back to heaven, leaving Kakama or Ruhanga, as he was also called, to rule the land.

This legend portrays social stratification in Ankore society. It was concocted so as to make the Bairu accept their sub servant position to the Bahima as being supernatural. Banyankore traditional religion is based on the notion of Ruhanga, the supreme creator and being. Ruhanga is said to live in heaven. There is also a strong belief in black magic, which is used by evil people and forces to interfere with the well-meaning Ruhanga. These evil forces can cause ill health, drought, and death among other atrocities. Each family or clan also had a traditional god called Emandwa that they could approach to communicate with Ruhanga through a spiritual medium. Each family or clan had a shrine for its respective Emandwa. These traditions have been greatly affected by forces of new civilizations and contemporary lives. Many Banyankore now practice Christianity mainly Catholicism and Protestantism and Islam-religions that were brought about through centuries of foreign contact and influence. Uganda has an estimated 84% Christians.

WHY STUDY RUNYANKORE?

Runyankore is one of the main languages of Uganda. Banyankore are the second largest ethnic group in Uganda, they constitute about 5-8 million speakers of an estimated 33+ million of Ugandan population. Many periodicals such as newspapers are also published in the language. The most popular newspapers are, Orumuri and Entatsi. Almost all radio and TV stations in western Uganda use Runyankore as the main language of broadcasting. It is taught and also used as a medium of instruction in kindergarten and primary schools. Runyankore is a Bantu language spoken by the Banyankore (Ankore people of Uganda). It is mostly used in the districts of Mbarara, Bushenyi, Ntungamo, Kiruhura, Ibanda, Isebo, Kanungu and Rukungiri. Students interested in international aid work, African languages and literature, African Art, African History, African linguistics, African sociolinguistics, anthropology, NGO work, exploration and travel or government work will find Runyankore a useful language to study.

Here are some typical greetings in Runyankore:

Agandi................................................................................. How are you doing?
[General and timeless greeting but more common among age mates]
Nimunungi.............................................................. I am fine/I am ok [specific reply to Agandi]
Osibiregye................................................................. How is your day going?
[Day time general greeting used at least from midday to late evening hours]
Orairegye/Oritreota........................................ How was your night? How did your night go?
[General morning greeting]
Origye/Oritota................................................................. How are you doing?
[Common timeless greeting more common among age mates]
Ndigye/Ndiaho.............................................................. I am fine/I am ok
[It is specific reply to Orairegye/Oritreota]
Kaige buhorgye? ............................................. Is it peace/How have you been in a long time?
[A very formal ageless and general greeting used after a long absence]
Eeh/Ego .................................................................Yes, It is peace [reply to Kaige buhorgye]
Ori buhoro..........................................................Are you peaceful/Are you at peace/ Are you alright?
[A very formal greeting used especially by an elder to his/ her fellow elders and people of other ages]
Eeh (Sebo ‘Sir’/Nyoabo ‘Mum’) ......................Yes Sir/Mum, I am peaceful
[reply to Buhoro]