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Uganda: Back to Our Roots - What It Means to Have Twins in Buganda

BY BRIAN MAGOBA, 29 JANUARY 2012

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When twins were born to him on May 13, 2011, Salongo Eric Jemba Lutaaya of Makerere University's Department of Performing Arts and Film debated whether to accord them a Christian celebration, or the traditional Ganda version suggestively named okuzina abalongo (literally dancing the twins).

He ended up doing both, to emphasise his controversial view that being Christian does not alienate one from one's cultural practices. The "safe" ceremony was held on January 15, 2012, at King's College Budo Chapel, the more misunderstood ceremony had been held throughout the night before.

Celebrating in our ancestors' style

It is said that the first recorded twin birth in Buganda during Ssekabaka Kintu's reign was deemed so unusual the gods decreed through their medium Keeya that unusual things would be allowed to happen.

For instance, it is the only time that Baganda have licence to publicly mouth obscenities of varying shades, the only time when physical contact is allowed between the parents and their in-laws (this includes a bum-bumping dance), and the only time they can sit together at the lujjuliro (traditional dining table), at least until the mujwa (child of either parent's aunt) "steps into the food".

Bawdy songs rich with puns and allegories abound, one of the tamer ones being "Abalongo twabazaala babiri ne Salongo, Mayanja mwana wange, jjangu ozine abalongo (Together with Ssalongo we gave birth to the twins, Mayanja my child, come and dance/celebrate the twins)".

Together with the invectives flung about at will, such double-entendre songs are what characterise the twin's celebration in the minds of most people. David Semwanga, a born-again Christian and Manager at Amani Arts Exchange, says, " Honestly, I would never attend such cultural ceremonies, my Christian background killed off any interest I would have had, plus all those ideas of twins' peculiar needs and observances are just myths."

The popular imagination has so many things wrong about what exactly happens there. For example, no sex actually happens at the ceremony, but especially those who have never attended are quick to market it as a sex-fiesta.

So much has changed since the days before foreign influences diluted the importance of this ceremony to the Baganda. For example the ceremony for Goodluck Jonathan Waswa Jemba and Albright Kitiibwa Mugabi Kato would have ordinarily happened days, if not moments after they were born.

The present meets the past

They would have started with Salongo Jemba climbing a tree in his father's compound or atop his father's kitchen and announcing to the four directions that he had had twins.

Instead, it took close to a year because of the need to find money to feed the invited people, where before everyone carried foods they would cook to the ceremony, and all were invited regardless of relation to the celebrants.

Also, the now-esoteric materials needed for the Kiganda celebration are not as readily available as they are used to be as are qualified practitioners who now cost about Shs500,000 because there are very few left.

A phone call has replaced the father's-compound announcement, and as more people deem cultural practices demonic, especially one as risky as the twins who if mishandled are believed to wreak misfortune, the increasingly-fewer celebrations are attended by even fewer numbers.

http://allafrica.com/stories/printable/201201300460.html[3/16/2012 12:24:24 PM]

Michael Nsibambi, a veteran cultural-arts practitioner with the Baganda Nkoba Zambogo Association, said "If I had twins, church would be the only option because by treating them the Kiganda way not only would I contravene my Biblical beliefs, but I fear what could happen to me if I did those things and messed them up".

Examples of the misfortunes are believed to include skin discolourations that make one look like parts of their skin were burnt away (abalongo okwokya), the twins killing off an unfaithful parent, and spreading ill-luck to the twins if their parent handles them before touching the lweza or bombo (Marmodica fortido) plants which work as virus-filtration mechanism.

But they are also said to bring good luck, especially to their parents. Sylvia Babirye, a lecturer in dance at Nagenda International School of Art and Design and a twin herself, said, " Our parents are immune to witchcraft, if they ask the umbilical cords that represent us in the basket where we were kept for anything they want, 98 per cent of the time it will be granted them."

The symbolic twins tied up in a basket are figurative relatives of the living twins. It is believed that harm comes to one who steals them and they make the twins immune to witchcraft. It is also believed that anyone who harbours bad intentions towards their parents will be killed if they touch them.

Parents of twins are accorded respect, beginning with the honorary titles which, as Salongo Jemba observed in a paper presented to students of New York University's Dance Abroad Program "mark us out as exceptional survivors who bear double every effort parents of single children make."

Sylvia Namuleme Kigula, a Nalongo(mother of twins) and director at Naggalabi Indigenous Theatre, adds that "twins stabilise families since they demand of parents to be faithful to each other or risk death, and grant long life and births to barren women since they also can cause childlessness to anyone who annoys them, especially intentionally."

Still, the practices that define the Ganda twins' celebration make for intriguing reading and participation. The mock fight between the substitute Nalongo and Salongo's families, and the need to always include an even number of mpogola (unmashed bananas) to any meal the twins will partake of.

They do not die, they "jump/ fly", and when they do, Kiganda lore has it their bodies do not decompose, they stay white forever like Sleeping Beauty.Except in exceptional circumstances like after the Nalongo and Salongo officially introduce them to their grandparents, the twins never leave their parent's house to visit.


Luckily for the Baganda, the gods are believed to have decreed to Keeya to celebrate them, instead of declaring them abominations fit to be buried alive in the forest scenarios like the Igbo twins that Chinua Achebe writes about in Things Fall Apart.

As far as intangible cultural heritage goes, it is one of those one must attend before globalisation drives such practices into oblivion.

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