

Box 20.11/24

EAST AFRICAN INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL RESEARCH,

Makerere College, P.O. Box 262,145

KAMPALA, Uganda.

ON THE NYORO CONCEPT OF MAHANO

J. H. M. BEATTIE*

The concept denoted by the Nyoro term *mahano* is comparable with similar notions found in other cultures. The word is the plural of the noun *ihano*, which means anything specially strange or marvellous. If a Nyoro wishes to express surprise or astonishment, for instance at some unexpected news, he is likely to say *Ky'amahano!* (How astonishing!), or simply *Mahano!* (Amazing!). But the word implies much more than merely an exclamation of surprise. Its most important reference is to conditions of ritual or magical danger, possessing a particular kind of potency. A condition of *mahano* is something to be avoided, at least by ordinary people. If it cannot be avoided, relief from the state of danger which it implies may be sought through the performance of special ritual.

In this note I give some account of the kinds of things which Nyoro believe to be *mahano*; I do not here attempt comparison with analogous data from other cultures. There are, broadly, four kinds of situations or events with which *mahano* is associated. The categories so distinguished are not mutually exclusive, and some things may fall in two or more of them, depending on the aspect from which they are regarded. These categories are: (1) certain things which may not be done, prohibited social behaviour; (2) certain transition states, primarily birth and death; (3) political authority, and (4) a residual category of things that are thought to be unnatural and alarming, which are outside the everyday order of events.

Taking the first of these four broad categories, there are at least five types of "deviant" social behaviour which gives rise

to *mahano*. These relate to, first, sexual behaviour, especially incest; second, behaviour by men to women; third, avoidance relationships and the observance of certain ritual restrictions in the sister's son-mother's brother relationship; fourth, certain status relationships, especially those involving the pre-eminence of the household head (*nyineka*), and fifth, the obligations implied in the blood pact (*mukago*). I give some examples of acts or omissions which give rise to *mahano* under each of these heads.

The worst kinds of incest are mother-son incest and father-daughter incest. Then comes brother-sister incest. For a man to sleep with any woman whom he calls "sister" is incest, but it is very much more heinous for a man to cohabit with his mother's daughter than with a patrilateral half-sister. Exempt from the rule against brother-sister incest are the Bito, members of Bunyoro's ruling clan of which the king (Mukama) is the head. But even the Bito (with the possible exception of the king in ancient times) would ordinarily cohabit only with a distant patrilateral "half-sister"; union with even a patrilateral first cousin was rare outside the royal line. No Bito, not even (according to my informants) the Mukama in traditional times, would sleep with a full sister or a matrilateral half-sister; "they respect their mother's child" (*nibazira owanyina*), Nyoro say. No Nyoro may marry or cohabit with a member of his mother's clan, or (unless he is a Bito) with a member of his own clan. These unions would give rise to *mahano*. It is similarly *mahano* for a man to cohabit with a woman born to any woman of his clan, that is, with any woman whom he calls *mwihiwa*; for such a woman is, in a

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Mahano is also caused if a man takes any woman on his father's bed, or on his mother-in-law's bed, or on his mother's brother's bed, or if a woman takes any other man on her husband's bed; this last offence is believed to cause the death of her husband. These restrictions are consistent both with the common requirement that the sexual activities of contiguous generations be kept separate, and, in the case of the first and third prohibition, with the high respect in which household heads (*nyineka*) are held.

It is also *mahano* for the shoulders of a man or his wife who is going to sow to be grasped by any other person of the opposite sex (this gesture stands for sexual intercourse in several cultural contexts) or if a mother permits this to be done to her, or does it to a man other than her husband, before her child's teeth have appeared. If she allows this, the child's upper teeth are likely to appear before the lower, which is itself *mahano*, and necessitates a long and expensive course of purificatory ritual.

A breach of the rule of avoidance of the wife's mother is also *mahano*; for a man to see, speak to, or especially to eat with his mother-in-law, at least during the first years of marriage, is believed to bring about a state of ritual danger and, in particular, to cause the wife's mother to suffer from an affliction called *buko*, said to be an ague-like condition of trembling and shivering. The cognate term *muko* is in fact used by Nyoro to refer to a daughter's husband or, more generally, to the husband of any clanswoman of the speaker. And the term *buko* itself generally denotes the relationship between a man and his wife's parents and siblings. It is also *mahano* for a wife to make free with the personal property of her

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Some of the restrictions relating to women the breach of which gives rise to *mahano* reflect the lower status of women in Nyoro culture. Thus it is *mahano* for a woman to raise the alarm (*kutera nduru*—to give a high-pitched ululating cry, tapping the lips with the fingers) while men are present. Women are also forbidden to eat chickens (*nkoko*), or, when they are adult, edible grasshoppers (*nseene*); these foods may be eaten by men only. Certain restrictions on men's behaviour to women are indicative, in a different way, of their unequal statuses. Thus it is *mahano* for a man to seize his wife by the neck while he is beating her, or to beat her while she is holding her child, while she is running towards the bed or is under it, or if she runs towards the kitchen.

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old-fashioned round house on the same occasion), for members of the household to wear dry banana leaves or stem fibre (*isansa* and *bigogo*), since these will be worn during the period of mourning, for anyone to throw a hoe in the middle of the floor of the *nyineka's* house (because this suggests *nyineka's* burial, after which the hoe used to dig the grave is traditionally thrown on the grave and left there), and for a son to place in position the centre pole of a house he is building while his father is living (for this should always be done for him by his father). It is also *mahano* for any member of a household to eat the first-fruits of any crop before the household head has tasted them; if he is away some must be put aside for him. Also, if a woman is planting, she must put aside a small amount of seed for her husband to eat, called "the household head's reserve" (*kisigiro kya nyineka*). Even certain acts by domestic animals are seen as threats to the *nyineka*; thus if a cock crows at night it is *mahano* and it is killed, for it is presuming to the *nyineka's* status. Similarly, a fowl which walks across the hearth while cooking is taking place there is killed. A fowl which begins to gasp and gape as though it were dying is also quickly killed, for this is said to foretell the *nyineka's* death.

A breach of the obligations implied by the blood pact is *mahano*, and a man who conceals food or beer from a visiting blood partner will suffer from the swelling up in his stomach of his partner's blood which he swallowed, smeared on a segment of coffee berry, at the blood pact ceremony. This may cause him to die, unless he recalls the offended blood partner, obtains his forgiveness, prepares a feast, and persuades him to lay his hand on his (the offender's) stomach.

These various manifestations of *mahano* differ greatly in seriousness and significance. The most important of them are those which relate to incest, and it is said that formerly persons guilty of the graver forms of incest were thrown into a river or lake, with the lower section of a grinding stone (*rubengo*), secured around their necks. Nowadays a person detected in a breach of the incest

prohibitions would be despised and ridiculed, and might be derided in the songs commonly sung at dances. People are said to have hung themselves from shame (*buhemu*) at being accused of incest, and some have left their homes and gone to live in far away parts of the country where they were not known. People say that a child born of an incestuous union is likely to be *kigwagwa*, that is, a rather half-witted person, inclined to do reasonless things, like walking into the fire and wandering in the bush. Like other kinds of *mahano*, incest is dangerous, and may cause those guilty of it and their relatives to die.

In the cases so far considered, where *mahano* is associated with the breaches of certain norms of interpersonal behaviour, the concept is comparable with the Western notion of sin. The emphasis is on the deterioration of ritual status that is involved, and on the consequences of this, rather than on any wrong that has been done to another. This is so even though some "wrongs" are associated with *mahano*, and acts that are *mahano* may certainly bring evil consequences on others besides the doers of these acts. But the point is that in Nyoro thinking the evil effects are due to the *mahano*, and not the *mahano* to the evil effects. For Nyoro certain things are bad because they are *mahano*; they are not *mahano* because they are bad. But we shall see that not all that is *mahano* is bad, though it is always dangerous.

The second broad category of *mahano*-producing situations comprises certain states of social transition. In Bunyoro, as elsewhere, ritual danger is thought to attach to certain statuses which are in some way anomalous, outside the everyday social categories. Three of these are strongly institutionalized; birth, death, and initiation into the *mbandwa* spirit possession cult. When a child is born, it and its mother must remain in the house (*ha kyoto*—literally "by the fireplace") for four days if the child is a boy, three if it is a girl. After this period, the mother may emerge from the hut and go about her ordinary duties, but for a longer period, properly four months for a

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boy, three for a girl, she is subject to certain restrictions. Thus she may not eat certain foods, such as termites, cow-pea (*nkole*), simsim, or *mugobe* (a plant used as a relish), nor may she have intercourse with her husband during this time. After this there is a feast, the parents are dressed in barkcloth and have their heads shaved, and the child is "taken out" and formally named, in the presence of relatives and neighbours. At this time, also, the parents should grasp each other by the shoulders, a gesture which (as we noted earlier) symbolizes sexual intercourse; only after this has been done may normal relations be resumed. In this instance the rite is called "making the child grow" (*kukuza omwana*). Twin-birth, and other abnormalities of birth or infancy associated with it, have a very much higher content of *mahano*; I consider them below.

In all cultures death is a most disruptive event socially, and in Bunyoro, as elsewhere, it entails ritual danger for the survivors. Analogously with birth, for four days after a death (three days if the deceased was a woman), the members of the bereaved family are in a state of grave ritual impurity. During this time they may not wash, shave or change their clothes. After this they are said to "emerge from death" (*kuturuka orufu*), and there is a formal ceremony of hair-cutting, washing, nail-clipping and anointing. This is sometimes called the "black shaving" (*kumwa okwiragura*), and after it the heir to the dead person (if he was a household head) is formally installed. Though the time of gravest danger is now over, the *mahano* persists for a period of weeks or even months, during which sexual relations are prohibited for all the members of the household, even with their spouses. This period concludes with a feast and another shaving ceremony, called the "white shaving" (*kumwa okwera*). And there is, finally, a rite of "getting rid the death" (*kumara orufu*), in which the *mahano* associated with it is symbolically left in the house of a distant "mother's brother" of the dead person.

The third transitional condition with

which *mahano* is strongly associated is initiation into the Nyoro spirit possession cult. Initiation into this not only puts the initiate in a state of grave danger, through contact with powerful spirits; it also implies his translation to an entirely new status, a translation which is symbolized by a ceremony of rebirth and in other ways. The long and complex initiation ceremonies are said to conclude with an act of ritual congress between the novice and a senior initiator of the appropriate sex. Informants are quite explicit that the object of this is to end the state of ritual danger which initiation has brought about; thus it is believed that if a female initiate were to cohabit with her husband before this ritual intercourse had been performed, all the *mahano* which is "in" her would endanger him, and might prove fatal to him.

The third broad dimension of social life with which *mahano* is associated is that of political power and authority. Nyoro are very conscious of the notions of power (*busobozi*) and government (*bulemi* or *bukama*). They think of these forces as being in some sense fearful and oppressive. A ruler, from the king down to a household head, is "feared" (*kutinwa*) as well as honoured and obeyed; indeed the noun which denotes the honour and respect in which a ruler is held (*kitinisa*) is derived from this verb, and might almost be translated "fearfulness". It appears that in the context of political relations *mahano* is (as I have argued elsewhere)¹ an aspect or expression of political power. This is plain in the delegation of authority, particularly of royal authority; in traditional Nyoro thinking about these matters, persons to whom the Mukama allots political authority receive at the same time a corresponding enhancement of ritual potency or *mahano*. This was especially exemplified in the traditional political system by those state dignitaries called the "crown-wearers" (*bajwara kondo*), though it is so, also, in lesser degree, in the case of less important chiefs. The crown-wearers were persons to whom the king awarded special beaded crowns, as well as

¹In "Rituals of Nyoro Kingship" in *Africa*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, April 1959.

boy, three for a girl, she is subject to certain restrictions. Thus she may not eat certain foods, such as termites, cow-pea (*nkole*), simsim, or *mugobe* (a plant used as a relish), nor may she have intercourse with her husband during this time. After this there is a feast, the parents are dressed in barkcloth and have their heads shaved, and the child is "taken out" and formally named, in the presence of relatives and neighbours. At this time, also, the parents should grasp each other by the shoulders, a gesture which (as we noted earlier) symbolizes sexual intercourse; only after this has been done may normal relations be resumed. In this instance the rite is called "making the child grow" (*kukuza omwana*). Twin-birth, and other abnormalities of birth or infancy associated with it, have a very much higher content of *mahano*; I consider them below.

In all cultures death is a most disruptive event socially, and in Bunyoro, as elsewhere, it entails ritual danger for the survivors. Analogously with birth, for four days after a death (three days if the deceased was a woman), the members of the bereaved family are in a state of grave ritual impurity. During this time they may not wash, shave or change their clothes. After this they are said to "emerge from death" (*kuturuka orufu*), and there is a formal ceremony of hair-cutting, washing, nail-clipping and anointing. This is sometimes called the "black shaving" (*kumwa okwiragura*), and after it the heir to the dead person (if he was a household head) is formally installed. Though the time of gravest danger is now over, the *mahano* persists for a period of weeks or even months, during which sexual relations are prohibited for all the members of the household, even with their spouses. This period concludes with a feast and another shaving ceremony, called the "white shaving" (*kumwa okwera*). And there is, finally, a rite of "getting rid the death" (*kumara orufu*), in which the *mahano* associated with it is symbolically left in the house of a distant "mother's brother" of the dead person.

The third transitional condition with

which *mahano* is strongly associated is initiation into the Nyoro spirit possession cult. Initiation into this not only puts the initiate in a state of grave danger, through contact with powerful spirits; it also implies his translation to an entirely new status, a translation which is symbolized by a ceremony of rebirth and in other ways. The long and complex initiation ceremonies are said to conclude with an act of ritual congress between the novice and a senior initiator of the appropriate sex. Informants are quite explicit that the object of this is to end the state of ritual danger which initiation has brought about; thus it is believed that if a female initiate were to cohabit with her husband before this ritual intercourse had been performed, all the *mahano* which is "in" her would endanger him, and might prove fatal to him.

The third broad dimension of social life with which *mahano* is associated is that of political power and authority. Nyoro are very conscious of the notions of power (*busobozi*) and government (*bulemi* or *bukama*). They think of these forces as being in some sense fearful and oppressive. A ruler, from the king down to a household head, is "feared" (*kutinwa*) as well as honoured and obeyed; indeed the noun which denotes the honour and respect in which a ruler is held (*kitinisa*) is derived from this verb, and might almost be translated "fearfulness". It appears that in the context of political relations *mahano* is (as I have argued elsewhere)¹ an aspect or expression of political power. This is plain in the delegation of authority, particularly of royal authority; in traditional Nyoro thinking about these matters, persons to whom the Mukama allots political authority receive at the same time a corresponding enhancement of ritual potency or *mahano*. This was especially exemplified in the traditional political system by those state dignitaries called the "crown-wearers" (*bajwara kondo*), though it is so, also, in lesser degree, in the case of less important chiefs. The crown-wearers were persons to whom the king awarded special beaded crowns, as well as

¹In "Rituals of Nyoro Kingship" in *Africa*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, April 1959.

the grant of political authority over specific territories and their inhabitants. Those who were favoured with crowns thereby received, as well as high political authority, a significant share of the dignity and prestige of the kingship itself. Like the king, they were subject to ritual dietary restrictions; they should eat only the traditional "white" foods (such as beef, milk, eleusine and certain other vegetables), and not the "black" or more recently introduced foodstuffs, like beans, bananas, and cassava. Nyoro express the ritual aspect of high political office by speaking of the high degree of *mahano* which the crown-wearers possess.²

The fourth and residual category distinguished above comprised those things and events which are extraordinary and in some way alarming. Plainly everything that is *mahano* has these qualities in some degree, but the things which I have put in this category appear to be *mahano* mainly for this reason, rather than because they possess some other kind of social importance. By far the most important of these are twin-birth, and certain other abnormal or unusual conditions of birth or infancy. Birth in any case gives rise to a condition of *mahano*, and when in addition the birth is an abnormal one, the importance and danger of the occasion is greatly increased. The *mahano* to which twin-birth gives rise is sometimes referred to as *mahasa*, and it both imposes stringent ritual prohibitions on the parents of the twins and on others, and involves specific prescriptions for getting rid of the *mahano*. Neglect of the proper ritual may lead to the death of the twins or the "burning" (*kwokebwa*) of the parents (this means that they may be afflicted with a painful skin disease, involving the depigmentation of patches of skin). The ceremonies, which have been described elsewhere,³ include the temporary segregation of the parents, the performance of special dances, feasting and gift-exchange, the participation of the *mbandwa* spirit Rubanga, and, in particular, the conveyance of the *mahano* of the twin-birth to the mother's

natal home, its symbolic return to the twins' parents' home, and its final disposal through an act of ritual sexual intercourse or its simulacrum. A few days after the twins are born, a representative of the twins' father announces the birth to his wife's parents, flinging a prepared object of symbolic significance in their courtyard, and fleeing lest he be chased and beaten for bringing the *mahano* there. Until the end of the *mahasa* period some months later, the parents are subject to rigorous ritual restrictions; thus they may not shave their hair, and they may not sleep together or lay hands on any other persons. At the end of this "black" period, the "white" period is opened by a formal visit by the mother's people to the twins' parents' home; this is sometimes spoken of as "returning the *mahano*". At the feast which then takes place the house in which the birth took place should be burned down, because the *mahano* attached to the birth would make it dangerous for the parents to live in it again: nowadays, since modern houses are larger and more expensive to replace than the traditional small "beehive" hut, a small facsimile of a house is erected, ceremonially entered by the parents carrying the twins, and then destroyed. Before the parents may sleep with each other again, each should perform an act of intercourse (whether actually or symbolically is not clear) with a complete stranger whom they should never see or cohabit with again, in order finally to get rid of the *mahano* which might otherwise prove fatally injurious to both of them and to their children.

Some of the other things in the category of the strange, fearful and abnormal, which are *mahano*, may be briefly catalogued. The practice of sorcery, witchcraft and spirit possession is *mahano*, or gives rise to it. The birth of monsters, such as children lacking eyes or limbs, is *mahano*, so is the birth of triplets, who were formerly killed, together with their parents. It is *mahano* for a man to "change into" a woman, or vice versa, for a man to "turn his friend

² cf. for example, Petro Bikunya, an ex prime minister, in his book, *Ky' Abakama ba Bunyoro*, London, 1927, p. 51.

³ cf. J. Roscoe, *The Bakitara*, Cambridge, 1923, pp. 161-65 and 250-57.

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