

### Ndorwá Famous Women

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### Abstract

This article focuses on famous women of Ndorwá region in North-East of Rwanda. It aims at drawing portraits of extraordinary heroines who marked the collective memory of Ndorwa region. Lives of women portrayed in this article are unique. It is this uniqueness that we highlight. Moreover, their portraits convey important information on social, cultural, political and economic organization of Ndorwa region.

**Key words:** Rwanda, women, heroines, Ndorwá

### Introduction

The Kingdom of Ndorwá was located to the North of the Kingdom of Rwanda, currently the southern area of the Republic of Uganda. It was governed by the dynasty of the Abashaambo clan, from which derived the phrase Ndorwá y'Ábashaambo. It was conquered and occupied by King Kigeli III Ndbárása (1706-1741). The monarch's long stay in this region gave rise to famous poetical battle of wits:

- *Mbwiré umwaámi ukó abaánda baámi baantumyé* (Let me convey to the king the message from other kings) by poet Musaáre, son of Nyakayoonga.
- *Baateewe n'íiki uburaké* (What made them furious) by poet Kibáráké son of Bagorozi. He composed this poem on the king's order.
- *Nóone kó wamazé ubuhiínge* (Now, you have completed farm work) by poet Musaáre.

In 1884, during the Berlin conference when the Western colonial powers shared out Africa and set new borders for African countries, the Kingdom of Rwanda lost a big part of Ndorwá territory. The remaining part is located in the North-East, in Buréera, Gicuúmbi and Nyagataré Districts, our area of research.

The aim of this study on Ndorwa famous women is to draw portraits of women who lived in Ndorwa and marked the collective memory of the region. They marked the collective memory because their lives were unique -“out-of-ordinary lives”- and though forces admiration, respect and for some fear. It is worth noting that reasons for which they marked the society deserve to be analyzed, for a better understanding of the context in which they lived. The period of the study is from the very ancient days up to 1961, when Rwanda kingdom became a republic<sup>5</sup>. It is important to highlight that the history of this region is also unique as summarized in our survey history.

This article is a result of the documentary research approach (review of literary and historical narratives), supplemented by individual in-depth interviews, focus groups and semi-structures interviews with people in the North-East of Rwanda, historians, men and women of culture<sup>6</sup>.

### 1. Nyabiíngi

In spite of numerous works on Nyabiíngi, the information around her life and death raise a number of questions: who is Nyabiíngi? Where is she from? When and how did she die? Why the devotion to her as a deity? Who was her direct successor after her death? So far, these questions have not yet found satisfactory answers.

For instance, a number of researchers (Ntamakero, 1982; Vansina, 2012) do not agree about her origin. According to Ntamakero (1982: 8) her roots are in Rwanda kingdom (Ndúga) and was a daughter of Ndahiro II Cyaamatáre (King of Rwanda during the XVI<sup>th</sup> c.), therefore a sister of Rugaáanzu II Ndóori. Her name was Nyabyinshi, and which became Nyabingi in Kiga language. He asserts that she received Ndorwa as a gift, “Iteto ry’abakobwa, from his brother Ruganzu.

Kangwage<sup>7</sup> asserts also that Nyabingi is a daughter of Ndahiro Cyamatatare, but gives another reason for her to go to Ndorwa. According to him, it is due to a difficult cohabitation with her father, the latter

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<sup>5</sup>On January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1961 the reign of king Kigeli V Ndahindurwa stopped due to political turmoils.

<sup>6</sup> Among them Prof. Mbonimana Gamaliel (historian), Rwasamirera Jean Berchmans (known in a radio show “Amateka y’urwa Gasabo) and Mukarutabana Rose Marie (known for the website of oral literature of Rwanda “Gakondo”), Kiményi Jean Berchmans, son of Thomas Karyaabwité Chief of Buberuka of Bashambo clan. Kimenyi used to be private secretary to King Mutára III Rudáhigwá

<sup>7</sup> Servillien Kangwage is an informant we met in Kamutore (Rushaki-Gicumbi),  
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offered her to go and settle in a different place in his kingdom, with a big number of servants<sup>8</sup> among them a servant woman called Gahu<sup>9</sup>. For others, she left for Karágwe (Tanzania) and was probably married (or refused to be married) to Ruhiinda, king of this kingdom. She left for Ndorwá. Learning that she was a princess, people rushed to her service, with all kinds of goods.

Rwasamirera presents her instead as the daughter of Nyabúnyana and King Karemeera I Ndagara and therefore, a cousin to Rugaázu II Ndóori not his sister. According to this version, Nyabiíngi played a big role in the liberation of Rwanda from the occupation by Banyabuungo. In fact, convinced that it was difficult for him to overcome the Banyabuungo who had invaded Rwanda, and having a premonition that his family risked decimation, King Ndahiro II Cyaamatáre sent his son Ndóori, heir to the throne, to his sister Nyabúnyana for shelter. Indeed, Ndahiro, his mother Nyirangabo and his wives including Nyabácuzi mother of Ndóori, perished in that war which was opposing Banyarwanda and Banyabungo. The Banyabuungo occupied Rwanda for eleven years. When Rugaázu was of age to access the throne, his aunt Nyabúnyana and her husband Karemeera I Ndagara, as well as loyal servants to Ndahiro II Cyaamatáre, decided to enthrone him. But he had to be married first. After consulting the oracles, Nyabiíngi was appointed as the fortunate elect, but the marriage was purely symbolic. Rugaázu was enthroned at Gatsíbo, but before leaving this place to undertake the re-conquest of Rwanda, he gave Ndorwá to Nyabiíngi as a present.

Vainsina (2012:176)<sup>10</sup> contends that her origin is in Mporóro (Uganda) and that she belongs to the Shaambo dynasty. G. Mbonimáana (2011: 154) notes the following:

During his expedition to Nkole, Rwabugiri attacked Ntare, king of this country and hunted him down. When he came back victorious to Rwanda, Rwabugiri brought many herds of cattle and several hostages, with several young girls including Nyiramubyeyi-Nyabingi. Because she played a big role

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<sup>8</sup> There are other sources and versions contending that she disagreed with her brother Rugaázu, rather than with her father.

<sup>9</sup> For some, Gahú is Biheeko's daughter rather than her servant. She is one of the most important successors of Nyabiíngi, after her death.

<sup>10</sup> "tandis qu'au Nord-Est les gens du Ndorwa adhéraient au culte de Nyabingi qui aurait été la fille du dernier roi indépendant du Ndorwa Mpororo avant la conquête nyiginya." in *Le Rwanda ancien: le royaume nyiginya*, Paris:Editions Karthala, 2012:176.

in the legendary history of this campaign, Nyabingi became famous. She may have been rewarded with the command of the Northern regions of Rwanda like Murera and Ndorwa where she died.<sup>11</sup>

Sémbagáre who has carried out a lot of survey on Nyabingi contends that she may have been queen of Ndorwá, succeeding to her brother Murarí, son of Nyakajuunga. She may then have organized resistance against Rwandan invaders and colonizers. He says that “The cult of Nyabiíngi was originated in Ndorwá<sup>12</sup> as a politico-religious movement opposed to the invader who had deprived former cattle and land owners of their property, and who ceaselessly exploited and oppressed them in all kinds of ways”<sup>13</sup>.

Historian G. Mbonimána does not agree with this opinion. According to him, even if it is mentioned as such in several sources,<sup>14</sup> relating the cult of Nyabiíngi to Bakíga , or even to Bahutú resistance to Rwandan Tutsi power<sup>15</sup> has no meaning.

Analyzing different versions gathered by M. Pauwels since 1951 and after noting that it is chronologically impossible to relate her at the same time to Ruhíinda, to the conquest of Ndorwá by Rwandan kings, and to Rugaáanzu Ndóori who is much anterior to her, J. Sembagare<sup>16</sup> comes to the conclusion that Nyabiíngi is simply a girl who lived in Ndorwá. She managed to become influential there and to draw her masters’ attention. She was therefore related to the Bashaambo kings of Ndorwá.

As said previously, there is no agreement about her origin. But all the versions agree on one point: Nyabiíngi lived at Kagarama ka Nyamíriínga (Kagarama near Nyamíriínga) (or Nyamíruúndi), close to Kabaáre in Kigezi in Ndorwa (today in the Republic of Uganda) and was for high ascendance. This fact of relating her origin to high ascendancy is an object of pride for the followers of the cult of Nyabiíngi and is meant to inspire fear to potential detractors. Because when you attack/challenge Nyabiíngi, you are holding a grudge against those who enthroned her<sup>17</sup>. Nyabingi became influential in that region at the

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<sup>11</sup> G. Mbonimana, 2011, “Le royaume du Rwanda des origines à 1900”, in D. Byanafashe et P. Rutayisire (dir.), *Histoire du Rwanda. Des origines à la fin du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Huye, Université Nationale du Rwanda, p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> Ndorwa Region, a stronghold of the bagirwá, is composed of the former communes of Kéeru and Butaro (Ruheengeri), and a small part of Byuumba. The rest, actually the greatest part, is in Uganda.

<sup>13</sup> J. Sembagare, 1978, “Le culte de Nyabingi: l’antagonisme entre Nyabingi et Lyangombe”, *Urunana*, XI, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Interview held on 25/3/2010 à Kigali.

<sup>15</sup> See for example J.E.-T. Philipps, 1928, “The Nyabingi. An anti-European secret society in Africa, in British Ruanda, Ndorwa and the Congo (Kivu)”, *Congo*, IX, t. 1, 3, p. 310-321.

<sup>16</sup> J. Sémbagáre, 1977, “Le culte de Nyabingi: sa naissance et son impact social”, *Urunana*, II, 31, p. 48; p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> J. Sémbagáre, *op.cit.*, p. 55.

point to become a deity. Nyabiíngi left Kagarama for Mpiimbi (also in Uganda). Devotion to her as a deity had already started, since the population rushed to beg for fertility and prosperity.

In Rwanda, the cults of Nyabiíngi is practiced in Rukíga, a region bordering Uganda, while the Kubaandwa cult, the cult of Ryangombe, Nyabiíngi's male counterpart, is practiced in the rest of the country. In some parts of Ruheengeri, Nyabiíngi bears the name of Nyirábaréera (thus relating this cult to the Muréera region).

Concerning her descendants, nobody knows whether she was married or not, or whether she had children. Anyway, it is said that before her death, she called for a certain Gahú considered by some as her daughter and by others as her servant, and transferred her own power into her mouth. This is the reason why Gahú replaced Nyabiíngi, the people turning to her for devotion. She became a priestess in charge of interceding on behalf of her followers with her mistress; she is therefore the very first *mugirwá* in this kind of cult. She left no descendants either.

The circumstances of Nyabingi's death are unknown. She may have been beheaded by Ruhiinda whom she had accepted as a husband; but he was a devout husband who eventually revolted and beheaded her, but nobody can surely assert that she had been married. On the other hand, her daughter or servant Biheeko may have been killed by one of Rwáabugiri's militia (the descendants of Búuki)<sup>18</sup>. Briefly, Nyabingi is a woman who lived in Ndorwa and became influential at the point to be invoked as a deity. This had started before her death, and ever since, the population implored her for fertility and prosperity. Her cult is known in the great Ndorwa (in Rwanda and in Uganda) where you may find her priestesses and priests, Abagirwa, or people who used to be abagirwa<sup>19</sup> or their relatives<sup>20</sup>.

## 2. Abagirwá (priestesses)

Kangwage gave us the following definition of *umugirwá*: "Someone working as a bridge or *medium* for people to access Nyabiíngi". He said that "*umugirwá* is one who collects the offertory meant for Nyabiíngi". All kinds of gifts are reported (pots of hydromel, cows, goats, etc.); some even bring their

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<sup>18</sup> Other versions talk of the sons of Gahurúbuka from the Abagina sub-clan. According to A. Kagame, Abagina were a section of Abatsíenzi Army Group under Mibáambwe III Séentaabyó. But it is probable that Gahurúbuka and Kagina, eponymous ancestor of Abagina, are one and same character.

<sup>19</sup> People recognised as Abagirwa but who ceased to practice.

<sup>20</sup> People who had in their family a relative who used to be umugirwa and who passed away.

own daughters. Each family had its *umugirwá*, officiating in the *gutérekeera* rite. After collecting the entire offertory, he/she had to take them to Nyabiíngi. When he/she returned, he/she explained what was to be done by the family.

The *umugirwá* must be enthroned, a practice called “*kwíima ingoma*”. He is the one entitled to address the complaints/grievances of those coming to Nyabiíngi. The latter dictates the responses to be taken back. For Nyabiíngi, speaking is called “*kubyúukuruka*”; and she speaks Kíga only<sup>21</sup>.

The office of *umugirwá* is hereditary, as asserted by Athanase Ngiúmpatse, an *umugirwá* we met in Ntágara (Buréera). Seemingly, he excludes women from this function, while several sources affirm that the early *bagirwá* were women. Besides, we met a woman, Pauline Bagasheésha (Mukáraange/Gicuúmbi), who claims to be *umugirwá* and who is acknowledged as such in her (family) circle.

*Umugirwá* was recognized through his/her outfit. He/she wears *igisúngo* (crown), *impígí* (charms), *igikáanda* (barkcloth or clot made of animal skin) and a sceptre with an iron tip. An informant told us that the *bagirwá* were considered as kings because people believed them to be rainmakers, to dispense prosperity and fertility, etc.

The successor of Nyabiíngi is unknown. But as already mentioned, there is Gahú considered by some as Nyabiíngi's daughter and by others as her servant, and to whom she transferred her own power. There is also a certain Biheeko, who must be the most famous of her many successors since her death; so much so that in the Butaro and Kéeru areas, a kind of Mecca for Muslims or Jerusalem for Christians, the true name for Nyabiíngi being unknown, Biheeko is honoured instead. When she left Kagarama, Biheeko settled at Nyamiyaga (Butaro-Kiíndooyi), then at Gasebéya, and finally at Muróongozi (Kéeru-Kaboná). It is on this Muróongozi hill, in a place called Ntágara, that Biheeko's shrine is located. We met some claimants to her ascendancy in their Ntágara stronghold. They include Athanase Ngiúmpatse, son of Rwáakageyo, son of Nzaarubara, son of Gatoóndwe, son of Búuzi, son of Bujára, son of Giheéngé, son of Biheeko. Besides, many people confuse them with other names such as Nyirámukíga, Rutágirákijuná<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Kigeli III Ndabárasa, after overcoming the Bashaambo kings of Ndorwá, sent a lot of people to colonize the area and he imposed Rwandan culture (including the practice of *kubaandwa*, a legacy from the Bacwéezi) and language. The inhabitants of Ndorwá refused to submit to the practice of *kubaandwa*, preferring the cult of Nyabiíngi and instead of Kinyarwaanda, kept the Kíga language.

<sup>22</sup> See Bishop M. Ntamakero, 1982, *Ibitekerezo bivugwa ku byerekeye Nyabingi*, Kabgayi, p. 21.

and Muserekande. The names of Rutágirákijuná (of Kíga origin) and of Nyirámukíga must be anterior to Muserekande known as Muhuúmuza (or Nyirágahuúmuza), wife of King Kigeli IV Rwáabugiri (1853-1895) and mother of Biregeya.

### **3. Muserekande (Muhuúmuza or Nyiragahumuza)**

Muserekande is a wife of the King Rwabugili, and a daughter (princess) of the King of Buha (Tanzania). There was a song that was dedicated to her as a daughter of Ndaba, and as a Queen wife of Rwabugili. Gamaliel Mbonimana, a historian, states that Muserekande resided in Kimihurura, where there is a statue of a woman and her son, in 1905/1906. This must be true as it was also mentioned by Father Alexis Kagame that Rwabugili got married to her in the aftermath of the Butembo battle; with victory celebrations held in Kigali (*Un Abrégé*, 1975: 48) after he had left his other two homes, one in Kabuye near Jali at Kanjogera's and another at Mt. Kigali at Nyirandabaruta's. Murara wa Ruhilima, a court ritualist (Umwiru) to the King Rwabugili, is the one who went to search Muserekande for the King in Buha. Muserekande got only a unique son with Rwabugili, and this son was named Biregeya.

When Rwáabugili died, a succession war known as “Rucuúnshu War” broke out, out of which Abeéga, clan of Káanjogera, the mother of Musínga and adoptive queen mother of King Mibambwe IV Rutarindwa, emerged victorious. Muserekande contested the authority of Musínga which was considered illegitimate and the colonial power then supporting him, in favour of her own sons. Rebellions broke out in the kingdom. These were conducted by those who were convinced that it was Biregeya who had the legitimacy to succeed Rutarindwa. But these rebellions got defeated. Muserekande took refuge to Ndorwa from where she repeatedly organized a rebellion, but her attacks were always repelled.

While in Ndorwa she became known as Muhumuza or Nyiragahumuza, “who brings comfort and peace”, and was invoked as a priestess or medium of Nyabingi. She became a religious icon and a figure of resistance to the British and Germans. She was reported to be the leader of many rebellions. After being arrested, she was deported to Kampala where she died in 1945.

According to P. Furere<sup>23</sup>, in Uganda, Muhumuza was welcomed with due honour, and a residence was built for her. Eventually, she was converted to Christianity, was baptized in the Protestant Church, and received the name of Evelyn. When she died, she was buried in the pantheon of Baganda kings. He asserts that he visited the pantheon of Baganda Kings and the guides show him where she was buried.

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<sup>23</sup> Philippe Furere is an informant we met in Gisovu (Cyanika-Burera),  
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Some informants told us that Nyirághuúmuza was a European woman of German descent, married by Rwáabugiri. But nowhere in Rwandan history is found the mention of a king who married a white woman. The first Europeans arrived in Rwanda by the end of the reign of Rwáabugiri. They were all males; nowhere are females mentioned.

Something is certain. Muserekande (Muhuúmuza or Nyiragahumuza) was wife to Rwáabugiri and after his death, she contested the authority of Musínga and the colonial power then supporting him, she tried to re-organize the Nyabiíngi cult, proclaiming herself Nyabiíngi in order to wage a rebellion against the Germans then supporting Nyigínya power in Rwanda<sup>24</sup>. After her defeat, she left for Bukoba in Tanzania, before going to Ndorwá (Mporóro) in Uganda, and eventually to Entebbe.

This is confirmed by G. Mbonimáana who thinks that Muhuúmuza was really Muserekande wife to Rwáabugiri and lived in Kigali in 1905/1906 where is presently located the Kimihurura roundabout, when Rwanda was still a German protectorate. Her son Biregeya was to succeed Mibáambwe Rutáriindwá.

#### **4. Rosalie Gicaanda**

Rosalie Gicaanda is daughter of Gatsíinzi and Mukweendegeri. She was born in 1928 at Rushebéya (presently in Rwaamikó Cell, Kabúungo Sector, Nyagataré District). The origin of her parents is Bugaánza, and they came to settle in Ndorwá, where Gicaanda was born, and baptised Rosalie.

In 1942, Gicaanda married King Mutára III Rudáhigwá in his second marriage, since he had divorced Nyiramakomaari, with whom he had no child. He had none with Gicaanda either. When Rudáhigwá died in 1959, Gicaanda was still young, but she never married. When she was killed in 1994 during the genocide against the Tuutsi, she was living in Butare town. Rosalie is known for her beauty. Those who knew her hailed her as being very beautiful, and this is the reason why she was chosen as wife to the king. According to the legend, young girls from all around the country were gathered in Nyaanzá, and she was the happy elect. She deserved it, having no scar! This explains that the queen should be special enough to attract the attention of the king. The fact that she had no scar just means that she was blameless.

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<sup>24</sup> M.-J. Bessel, 1938, "Nyabingi", *Uganda Journal*, VI, 2, p. 73-86 ; Murinda Rutanga, 1991, "Nyabingi Movement : People's Anti-colonial struggles in Kigezi 1910-1930", *CBR Working Paper*, n° 18, p. 10, 51, 90-99 ; J. Vansina, 2001, *Le Rwanda ancien : le royaume Nyiginya*, p. 176 ; I. Linden & J. Linden, *Christianisme et pouvoir au Rwanda (1900-1990)*, p. 126 et 147 ; C. Price, *Becoming Rasta : origins of Rastafari identity in Jamaica*, p. 62 ; E.-B. Bisamunyu, *The Shores of Lake Victoria* ; K.-E. Sheldon, *Historical dictionary of women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 160.



Rosalie was also known for discretion. She was not the kind of woman who featured in State Affairs; and in case she got involved, she did it in secrecy. Besides, in Rwandan tradition, the king co-reigned with his mother, the queen-mother. According to the account of Kiményi Jean Berchmans<sup>25</sup>, son of Thomas Karyaabwiité Chief of Buberuka and Umushambo, who used to be private secretary to King Mutára III Rudáhigwá, it was abusive to call the king's wives Abaámikazi (queens). This status was not recognized by the monarchy system. For the matter, B. Muzuúngu (2003: 307) wrote: « The Royal Court was first of all composed of the two monarchs: the king (*umwaámi*) and the queen-mother (*umugabékazi*) representing the male/female principle in Rwanda ». Finally, Rosalie was known for goodness and generosity. We have collected testimonies from ordinary people that all come to this: “*yari umunyaangeso nziizá*”, or, she had a good character. She was characterized by generosity, humility, meekness. It is even said that Gicanda Rosalie had an incomparable hospitality, receiving her guests with pleasure, and vitalizing them with milk which was always available at the palace.

While we were carrying out this research on famous women in history and literature of Rwanda, we were told by some people that apart from being the king's wife, Gicanda Rosalie did not do anything special to be remembered on; however, her entire life reflects a remarkable lesson. She became widow at tender age, without a child, but she bear with it, as she did not get married again; she patiently lived in political turmoil of the moment blamelessly. She was a very honest queen, characterized by self-respect and dignifying her title as queen, until she was disgracefully killed. She is among numberless victims of Genocide perpetrated against Tutsi in 1994.

## **5. Chiefs' wives: influential women**

First of all, these women were famous because they were wives to important men; it is metonymic celebrity. And because of this status, they could influence their husbands in their decision-making. Then, chief and sub chiefs' wives were respected and in most cases, were a necessary passage to access the chief. As our informant Marianne Mukáarwéego puts it so well, “*Inkókorá iséguye ni yó iséenga!*” or, all prayers are expressed and answered in the bedroom secrecy. For this reason, those ladies were dutifully courted. Some of them even made it a point to access power themselves. A good example in Ndorwá is Budéensiyaná, wife to Chief Rubaangura<sup>26</sup> who, after her husband's unexpected death, obtained the

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<sup>25</sup> We met him in Butunzi (Kinihira-Rulindo district).

<sup>26</sup>Jean Berchmans Rubaangura was the chief of Bukonya chieftaincy between 1941-1942 (See Alexis Kagame, *Indoheshabirayi*, 1949)

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privilege to administer a sub-chieftaincy in Muréera chieftaincy. Our informants could not tell us her family name, or the sub-chieftaincy she administered. In Muréera, Mushaambokazi is also reported to have been sub-chief.

## 6. Nyirántwaari

She is known for her relationship with her son, the famous Basebya. To allude to the latter: Basebya baa Nyirántwáari ku Rugezi (Basebya son of Nyirántwaari at Rugezi). The story of Nyirántwaari is one of a girl who was impregnated and as required by tradition, she was to be exiled on a desert island where according to beliefs; she was to be devoured by wild beasts, or to be drown. She was drown in Rugezi, a big marshland located between Buberuka Ndorwá (presently Buréera District), and was rescued by some “Batwá” hunting nearby. Their leader found her beautiful and married her. Nyirántwaari begot a son who received the name of Basebya, an allusion to his shameful conception<sup>27</sup>.

Based on literature above, it is not easy to determine if Nyirantwari originated from Ndorwa or elsewhere in Rwanda. What we know is that many elements in the account of her life are similar to Rwandan tradition. In fact, in Rwandan tradition a girl who was impregnated was to be exiled on a desert island where she was to be devoured by wild beasts, or to be drowned, because they believed that a child conceived in those circumstances was a malediction. Another matter of fact, normally, in Rwandan tradition the ascendancy is patrilinear. B. Muzuúngu (2003: 258) notes the following on the matter: “According to the traditional legal conception, Rwandan individuals are classified according to the legal husband of her mother”. However, G. Mbonimáana<sup>28</sup>, quoting O.-G. Minaáni (1981) and F. Naahímáana (1993), notes that “from the point of view of identity, some children are identified using their mother’s name”. It is the case with children by servants at the court, like Munigantaama son of Nyiramuheenga at the court of queen-mother Nyirámavúgo II Nyiramoongi, Sézikeeye son of Nyirámivuúmbi, and Rwaagacúzi son of Nyirabahuunde at the court of King Yuhi V Musínga (Mijespoc, 2005: 104).

These women occupied an important position and where therefore more influential than husbands. It is also the case with children whose fathers were unknown. Identification with women is then no exceptional fact in ancient Rwanda. Therefore, this affiliation of Basebya to his mother finds an explanation in the circumstances of his birth. It is reported that when his mother used to cradle him, she ordered him to take revenge, one day. Once he came of age, he turned into the fearful warrior and fighter

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<sup>27</sup> Basebya comes from the verb *gusébya* /ku-séb-y-a/ < *guséba* /ku-séb-a/ which means to disparage, less one’s face.

<sup>28</sup> G. Mbonimana, *op.cit.*, p. 159-160.

we have ever known in Rwandan history. Nyirántwaari is therefore famous because she is Basebya's mother. Basebya's birth, as well as his life has all the elements to make of him a "terrible child", <sup>29</sup> after the fashion of Gashúubi, Ndabaga, Binégo, etc.

### **3. Why are these heroines so scarce?**

#### **3.1. Is Ndorwá non-feminist?**

All along the survey, we often heard this: "They had no right of expression." Women had to keep demure and look after their household chores. They had no right to visibility in common public activities. But what is paradoxical and interesting is that after this assertion, our informants added some concession introduced by "*kereka . . .*" (except. . .) to indicate an exception. Meaning that what was asserted was not applicable to all women. What deserve to be mentioned is that all those exceptions had a high ascendancy or were in the circle of power, which seems normal. And it is the case for women listed in this article. However they marked more the collective memory in that region due to the uniqueness of their lives.

#### **3.2. Ndúga honours women more than Ndorwa"?**

During our survey we heard also: "famous women were reported, especially in the royal court circles or in great families"; "Ndúga was more civilized and therefore more open to the celebrity of women than Rukíga". It is true that central Rwanda boasts several women's names that played a political and/or cultural role. Nyiratuunga, Gahiindiro's mother, assumed the regency before her son was of age. Dancille Nyirakigweene, wife to Nyaantábana, son of Kabaáre, administered Mbuye (Ruhaango). In Kabagali, Kaamporóro, wife to Ntúuro, son of Nyirimigabo administered Nkóre and Masagára. In Gisaká, the name of Thérèse Nyirákabúga<sup>30</sup> is often mentioned. She was wife to King Yuhi V Musínga, and was entrusted with the leadership of the sub chieftaincy of Vumwe from 1932 to 1960 in Gisaka, after her separation with the King. But this does not allow confirming that Nduga honoured women more than Ndorwa. The explanation which seems more likely valid is that Ndorwá was conquered and annexed under Kigeri III Ndabárasa and it had to adopt the history and heroes/heroines of the occupying power, thereby putting in the shade its own icons. It is the very meaning of colonization.

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<sup>29</sup> A. Kimonyo,, « Le thème de l'enfant terrible dans la littérature rwandaise », mémoire de licence, Ruheengeri, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Nyirakabuga was the mother of Musinga's son named Rwigemera Etienne who had been chief of Urukiga chieftaincy (Byumba) between 1941-1942 (See Alexis Kagame,, *Indoheshabirayi*, 1949)

Moreover, it is necessary to recall that our research focused on the part of Ndorwa which remained part of Rwanda territory after Berlin conference and which continued to bear the name for several years<sup>31</sup> thereafter, we are sure that a research in the big part of Ndorwa situated in Republic of Uganda, could bring another light.

#### 4. Conclusion

The objective of the survey we have carried out in this region, formerly part of Greater Ndorwá, was to collect narratives on famous women who left a mark in its collective memory. Our objective is reached as the names that are selected are those of women people recognize as part of their cultural and historical heritage. Concerning the small number of these famous women in Ndorwá, explanation is that these women had an “out-of-ordinary” element in their lives which make their souvenir vivid in people’s mind. We are sure that there are many more women who played in great role in that region, but whose names are not quickly recalled in peoples’ mind as their role was maybe assumed normal.

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<sup>31</sup> Kugeza 1962 ako karere kitwaga Ndorwa.

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### **Appendix**

A map of Ndorwá taken from FREEDMAN, J. *Nyabingi. The social history of an African divinity*. Tervuren. 1984.

