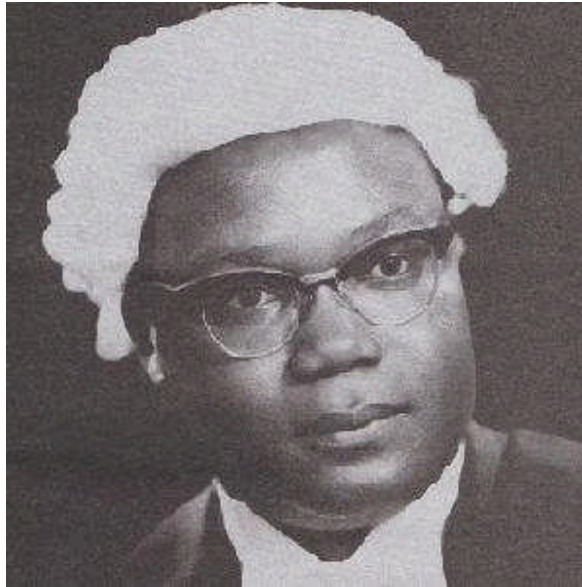


Simani Sangale – profile of a lawyer cum author



By Shad Bulimo, June 26 2010

He is neither a professional author nor an anthropologist. He is a lawyer, the first one to join a select group of learned friends from Tiriki. This is Simani Sangale, who through sheer interest in ethnography has devoted his time and resources to study the customs and traditions of his people, Abatiriki. The product of his many years of field research and oral study is a book entitled: *Tiriki Community Customs and Traditions*.

Before Simani's book, everything about Tiriki culture was seen through the prism of Western scholars of whom the American, Walter H. Sangree stands out. It is a brilliant exercise in originality that debunks some of the myths portrayed by those with a colonist mindset or using secondary and third party sources. Unlike foreign anthropologists, Sangale, a Mutiriki himself, gives an original perspective of the Tiriki culture born out of his upbringing, observations and interviews (in Lutiriki) with various elders in the community.

His father, Benjamin Sangale was a respected elder in the community and it is his commitment to serving his people that the young Sangale derives inspiration. Surprisingly, the young Sangale was not the first choice to inherit his father's

mantle in the cultural leadership of the Tiriki. Traditionally this role automatically goes to the father's first son. Although third born, Tiriki elders preferred him because he had demonstrated keen interest in cultural matters from a very early age.

It was a time when the Tiriki were at a cultural crossroads; caught between the advancing army of schools and Christianity and preserving their culture in its original format. The turning point came in the early 1940's when through a combination of circumstances, a venerated idumi elder, Nuhu Sakwa, converted to Christianity (Salvation Army). Sakwa became the face of a new type of idumi (circumcision rituals) which incorporated aspects of the traditional and modern practices acceptable to both traditionalists and Christians. Simani was among the first initiates to be circumcised under the new order in 1944 at Sakwa's Christian Kavunyonje (circumcision grove in dense forest).

With this initiation, Simani knew what his future role in the community entailed. And, although he had undergone the necessary drilling in tribal culture, especially the need to protect the secrets of the idumi rituals from women and the uninitiated (avasoleli), he felt he needed to learn more about his people in order to lead them through the transition.

"I said to myself let me have a proper look at what this role entails and what goes on in the community," he says. "Luckily for me I found knowledgeable elders willing to give me all the induction I needed in the customs and traditions of Abatiriki."

He soon realised that the subject matter was weighty and although he understood most of the contents, he felt with time he could easily forget especially because he was spending a lot of time in pursuit of education. "I said to myself this needs to be captured in writing otherwise it will disappear with time," he says. Over a period spanning many years, he carried out several interviews with different elders in Lutiriki which he carefully documented.

At the core of Tiriki culture is the definition of "who is a Tiriki?" Because the tribal area is populated by clans from various tribes, this is a legitimate question.

However the answer is surprisingly simple. “To be a Tiriki, one must accept the Tiriki culture. If children are circumcised in the Tiriki way, they automatically become Tiriki, irrespective of where their parents came from,” he says. An adult immigrant made an application to the council of elders. If he was already circumcised, he would be exempted from certain aspects of the idumi rituals such as dancing naked but had to spend some time in the hut of seclusion known as erumbi. Additionally he had to brew a large quantity of traditional beer known as busaa and invite elders for a feast.



Initiates performing the vukhulu dance wearing their traditional masks known as ingolole (singular, plural tsingolole)

The name Tiriki is derived from the Kalenjin tribe, the Terik, said to have split from the Elgon Masai (Sabaot) sometimes in the 19th century. Scores of Luhya clans who immigrated and got assimilated transliterated the name Terik into Tiriki. The largest immigrants are Maragoli, but there are also clans from Bunyore, Wanga and Bukhayo in Busia.

Sangale says the elaborate idumi rituals were not just about circumcision as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. “It was the only college that offered induction into various aspects of Tiriki culture. At the base of these teachings was

the fact that if a boy is going to be made into a man, to do his job properly, he has to be toughened to appreciate the challenges he would face in the administration of his social duties.”

The boys were initiated into a graded system of semi-generational age groups known as lirika members of which had lasting mutual roles and respect for one another. Each lirika had three circumcisions seasons held every five years. This means one lirika age grade cycle spans 15 years.

Among other famous Tiriki tribesmen who underwent idumi rituals include Court of Appeal Judge, Justice Daniel Aganyanya, the late Adambi khwa Asalache, author and poet (the first Tiriki to be enrolled at Royal Technical College - now University of Nairobi in 1958 in Architecture Department but left to go England in 1959 where he died in 2006). Then there is also Simani’s brother, Mike Ayaga Sangale, the first Mutiriki to go for further studies in US in 1961 where he qualified as an accountant and later worked for the UN in New York. The late James Munyedi was the first Mutiriki to join the coveted Alliance High School from where he was admitted to University of Nairobi to study Engineering. Finally there was the late James Minjo, the mathematician who was the first Mutiriki to join Makerere University and thereafter Cambridge in England.

Born to Benjamin and Rebecca of Shamakhokho, Jivovoli sub location, East Tiriki, Simani is the third born in a family of four boys and three girls. These are: Peter, Rachel, Ayaga, Isadia, Jane and Nelly.



The author, Simani Sangale (right) with his father, Benjamin Sangale (left) and two of his sons – Andrew (left) and David.

His early education at Kaimosi was not without incident. He was expelled from Kaimosi Primary School because his parents worshipped with the Church Missionary Society (CMS) rather than Quakers which was dominant in the area. “In those days, the school system was along denominational lines,” he says. Consequently he had to travel ten kilometres to a CMS school at Goibei where he sat his Common Entrance Examinations in 1946 before proceeding to Nyang’ori. After passing his Kenya African Primary Exams (KAPE) at Nyang’ori, he was admitted to Government African Boys School (now Kakamega High School) in 1950 where he sat for Cambridge School Certificate Exams (equivalent to ‘O’ Levels in 1953.

He was admitted to Siriba Teachers College at Maseno and after qualifying as a teacher in 1954 was posted to teach at his alma mater, Nyang’ori in 1958. Although he enjoyed teaching, it was never his calling and just a year later left for England for further studies. Simani first enrolled at Westminster Polytechnic (now

Westminster University) for 'A' levels then proceeded to study law at the University of London. He was admitted to Grays Inn, London, as a barrister at law before returning to Kenya in 1966 to work as a criminal prosecutor in the Attorney General's chambers.

The ambitious lawyer quit the civil service to set up his own practice, Sangale & Co in 1971 in Nairobi's Koinange Street. Between 1975 and 1976 he was elected chairman of the influential Kenya Law Society (LSK). He retired from a fulfilling legal career in 1999 and has devoted much of his time writing his book and doing consultancy work. In 2003, he was among 19 eminent lawyers to receive a presidential commendation by being appointed to the coveted position of senior counsel of the High Court of Kenya (equivalent to UK's Queen's Counsel). Other big names to be honoured with him include the long serving Attorney, Amos Sitsilwa Wako, Lee Muthoga, Mutula Kilonzo, Paul Muite, GBM Kariuki, Joe Okwach, Nzamba Gitonga (chairman of Committee of Experts), Gibson Kamau Kuria and Fred Ojiambo, among others.

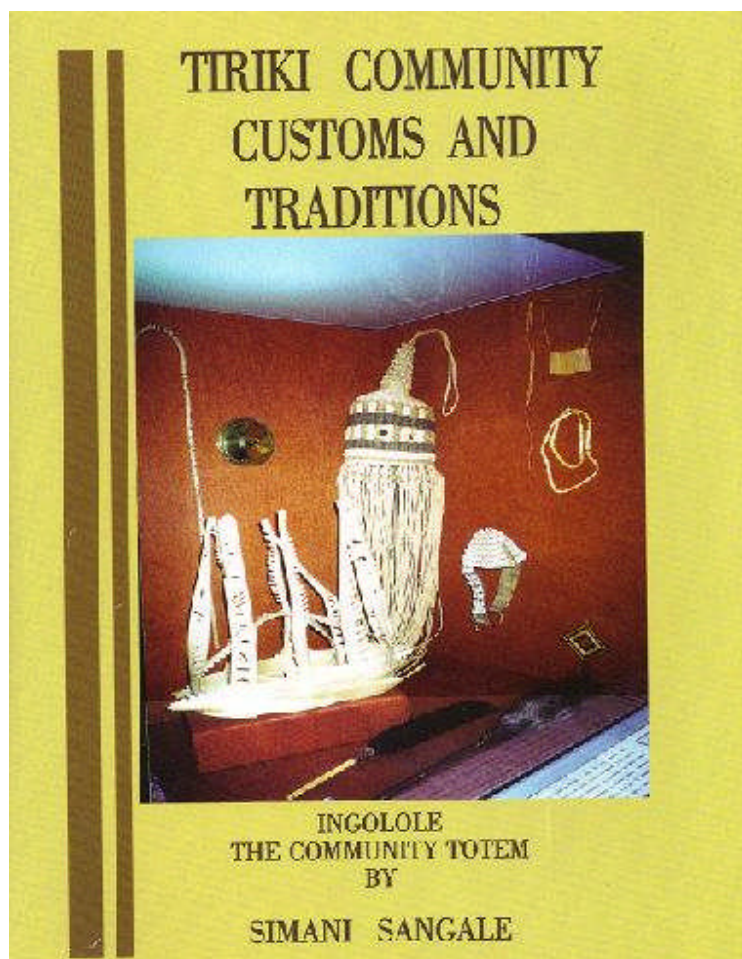
A dedicated family man, the semi retired counsel's brood has nine offspring – Ruth, Evelyn, Jean, Andrew, David, Michael, Linda, Patrick and Diana most of whom live in England. He lives in relative comfort in the leafy Kileleshwa and divides his time between Nairobi and Tiriki where he is constantly needed to perform cultural duties.

On the future of idumi and the youth in general, Simani says although culture is an important ingredient in the totality of an individual, it must adapt to modern times. However he is disappointed the education system is producing youth who have no clue what they can do with the knowledge they have acquired in school. "Most look to teaching because being so far away from cities like Nairobi, there is little else to aspire to but they need to look at other horizons like engineering," he says.

On the elusive question of Luhya unity, Sangale proposes that each sub tribe forms a caucus to represent their interests at the tribal level. Initiatives like Luhya Council of Elders are a good start but they need finance, he says. "A big hindrance to Luhya unity is that some sub tribes believe in themselves." Most

leaders shout about Luhya unity but such sloganeering tactics are targeted at selfish political ends. At the moment there just doesn't seem to be any credible political force to push the initiative. The late Masinde Muliro tried. "Other Luhya leaders whom I think have tried to bring Luhya people together are: Martin Shikuku, Moses Mudavadi and Burudi Nabwera and then we have the post colonial group of Musa Amalemba and WWW Awori", he says. "Out of the so called young Turks like Dr Bonny Khalwale, Cyrus Jirongo and Musalia Mudavadi, I feel Mudavadi is in a good position but does not appear to be forceful or persuasive enough."

To buy a copy of Simani Sangale's book (below), contact: editor@abeingo.org



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