

Haya

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The Haya (also known as Ekihaya, Ruhaya, Ziba, and Kihaya) constitute one of the dominant ethnic and linguistic groups in Tanzania, the largest being the Sukuma and the Nyamwezi. The latter occupy the region to the southwest of the Haya. Originally from West Uganda, the Haya people migrated from this region to Tanzania to escape endless wars. They currently live along the shores of Lake Victoria in the Bukoba District of the Kagera Region in the extreme northwest.

The language of the Haya people is also known as Haya, and is one of several Niger-Congo languages spoken by the people of Tanzania west and northwest of Lake Victoria. It comprises a number of dialects, including Bumbira, Edangabo, Ganda-Kiaka, Hamba, Hangiro, Mwani, Nyakisisa, Ekiziba, and Yoza, which are spoken by several Haya subcultures. With an estimated population of about 1,200,000, the Haya people make up about 3.2 percent of the entire population of Tanzania.

Largely an agricultural people, the Haya are known to grow bananas and coffee, which they traded long before the arrival of Europeans. Throughout history Haya women have also produced excellent handicrafts.

Like other indigenous groups in Tanzania, the Haya people have their own unique set of rituals, some of which share common characteristics with rituals performed by other ethnicities. Their traditional religious activities often center on role-specific deities, ancestral spirits, witchcraft, sorcery, and rites of passage, providing a channel for the seeming paradoxical expression of both righteousness and evil. Deities and spirits are known to possess worshipers at various stages of worship. Animal sacrifice and masked dancing – a common medium for spirit possession, play an important role in the overall belief systems of

the Haya. Dancing is also prevalent as a key part of their ceremonies and celebrations, as in popular cleansing rites and coming-of-age ceremonies for young people.

Although *Mungu* and *Mulungu* (also sky or sun) are widely used throughout Tanzania and East Africa as names for an all-powerful God, the Haya also recognize and worship Ishwanga who they believe to be a Supreme Being – the almighty and ever-present creator; the ruler of the heavens and earth that rewards the good and punishes the wicked.

In a sense, therefore, the religious practices of the Haya are both monotheistic and polytheistic since a pantheon of lesser gods, spirits, and other divinities serve as an intermediary between humans and the ultimate God. And, like many traditional African religions, the Haya do not display any rigid orthodoxy in religious performance and mythological belief. This also implies the lack of heterodoxy since there are several moral and ceremonial paths to an end, in spite of the presence of accepted ritual items and the existence of a hierarchical structure of supernatural beings.

As part of a religious experience that exploits both good and evil, witchcraft is a central and widespread component of indigenous Haya religions and allows the people to make sense of their arbitrary misfortunes. Witches are known to cause epidemics, floods, and drought, but beyond perpetrating evil they are believed to possess the power to halt such catastrophes. Thus, when misfortunes occur, culpable witches are typically hunted down and punished after a system of divination is carried out by qualified diviners. Sometimes retribution is meted out in the form of murder.

Women are most often singled out as witches and killed during periods of extreme weather for economic reasons. There are those that contend that this is also the trend because of gender inequities that are pervasive throughout Tanzania.

-- Philip U. Effiong

Further Reading

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