FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Rebels' Hour

Lieve Joris

An extract pp (15-21; 108-111; 196-197)

Original title	Het uur van de rebellen	Translation	Dutch into English
Publisher	Augustus, 2006	Translator	Sam Garrett

p 15-21

HIGH PLATEAUS, 1967

The people of the high plateaus in the east of the country lived outside of time, they often had no idea how old they were, but his mother remembered exactly when he was born: on the second day of the second month of the year 1967, early in the morning, just before the chickens started talking. It was a blessed day, for until then she had only had four daughters, and a woman without a son was seen as barren by her in-laws. Through his birth he'd saved her late husband's cows, which would otherwise have been divided among his uncles. She named him Mvuyekure, he who comes from afar, like his grandfather who had been long in coming as well. The nickname she gave him was Zikiya.

They lived in Ngandja, a hilly region with pastures green and untouched. Old Rumenge, the same one who had once killed a lion with his spear, had gone there around 1955 with his two wives and his children. He'd found a small community of Bembe, who raised manioc and beans and hunted apes and wild pigs in the surrounding forest. After he made friends with their chief the others followed, until there were about a hundred of them.

They themselves were called *Banyarwanda* - people of Rwanda - because they originally came from there, although some of them were from Burundi. That was in the days before the *Ababirigi*, as they called the Belgians, when there were no borders and their ancestors moved west to look for better pastures for their cows or escape conflicts with local rulers.

Zikiya was around four when rumors of rebels came blowing over the hills like a bad wind. The rebels were after their cows, which they promised to distribute among the poor Bembe farmers. Before long the Bembe chief sided with them, and the first fatalities followed.

Zikiya's people gathered their meager possessions and fled, men, women and children, cows and sheep, watched over by armed warriors from the safe region of Minembwe who had come to protect them. Somehow, that escape and his father's death became intertwined in his child's memory - he grew up in the bitter certainty that his father had been killed by Bembe rebels.

According to his uncles he had made the journey on his mother's back, but in his memory he could already walk, for during one rest stop he wandered off the path. Only when the caravan was ready to move on did his mother notice he was gone. In a panic, she went looking for him. She found him playing happily in a banana plantation. It was the first time he saw his mother cry.

For seven days they were on the road. Sometimes they walked across open countryside with rolling pastures, then back into the forest again, struggling uphill between trees with long, frayed beards of lichen and fast-running brooks with slippery green stones. Sometimes they were attacked. By the end of their journey there were ten of them missing; a number of cows had run away during clashes with the rebels.

In Minembwe, government army trucks patrolled the hillsides. President Mobutu had come to power six years earlier, in 1965, but had great difficulty imposing his authority on this eastern outpost. The plateaus were a perfect base for the rebels: there were almost no people, very few roads, and Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania were close by.

The Cold War was still in full swing. To the partisans of rebel leader Laurent-Désiré Kabila, Mobutu was a straw man for the Americans and the former colonial rulers. They had come from socialist Tanzania to fight against his regime. Simbas - Lions - they called themselves. At first the Banyarwanda tried to befriend the Simbas, but once the rebels began hankering after their majestic cattle the cowherds turned to the government army for protection. You might kill a man, but not his cow.

In those days, Mobutu's soldiers still behaved. They kept a low profile and listened to the people. They distributed weapons among the Banyarwanda, so they could protect their cattle. When they themselves needed a cow to eat, they paid for it.

One day a lieutenant-colonel came to visit them in their new hut in Minembwe. Zikiya's mother offered him milk. "Watch this, in a minute they'll take off running," the man said to his soldiers standing outside the door. Because that was what always happened when soldiers came to visit: people gave them milk, then ran away.

The colonel had used a Lingala word that Zikiya understood "move away". "Why are they going to move away?" he asked. The man laughed, pulled him over and shared his milk with him, so that Zikiya didn't want to leave him anymore, and his mother, instead of running away, came closer to hear what the man had to say. "That was a good soldier," she said afterwards.

Later, the family moved back to Irango, where they had lived before going to Ngandja. Irango lay hidden behind a ridge; no passerby would ever suspect that people lived there. Their round huts - walls of sunbaked cow manure with straw roofs around a bamboo palisade - were in bad shape after their long absence, but soon they had built new ones and at night would once again drift away to the heavy breathing of their cows sleeping in the grass.

Cows were sacred to them. They drank their urine as medicine and used it to rinse their *ngongoro*, the wooden flask with a braided cap in which they stored milk. A cow can't talk, they said, so you can never argue with her; she's like an angel, she wouldn't hurt a soul. They ate almost no meat, but lived on milk, corn and beans. They had the same tall, sinewy build as cowherds in other parts of Africa. When a cow died they mourned, but the Bembe - who were short and muscular – rejoiced, because they knew they would soon eat meat.

His father had been the oldest son in the family. When Zikiya's grandfather died, he was given a bull and decked out in the old man's possessions: a white *pagne* that hung over his shoulder and was far too big for him, an ivory bracelet and an *inkwebo*, the long, iron-tipped walking stick men carried when they went into the hills; you could use it to poke a stubborn cow in the backside, to chase away nosy children or to vault a stream. None of those heirlooms had been kept, but the memory of the ceremony was still with him.

He and his older sister were afterthoughts, the others had already moved away. "Don't bother about her," his mother said about his sister. "We'll marry her off later on." Sons add to one's own family, the saying went, daughters to those of another. Sometimes his mother sold a cow in order to buy him school supplies. But they'd talk about it first. If it was a cow that listened when called, or that walked out in front and showed the other cows the way, she picked another one.

Before going to school in the morning he had to take the cows to pasture outside the village. When he came back, white clouds wafted from from the dewy roofs, and all Irango seemed to be steaming gently in the rising sun. Inside, the smoke from the wood fire hung low in the room. It stung your eyes if you weren't used to it; whenever an outsider came to visit, his eyes would start watering. After Zikiya's early-morning outing, his clothes were soaked from the moist mountain air. Other children had to wait until they dried of their own accord, but he had a towel. Where his mother got it, he had no idea, but it was just for him.

Sitting beside the fire he drank the milk his mother had prepared for him. Then he picked up his exercise book and walked to Kagogo: straight down through the forest, across the river and then back up the hill - a forty-five minute walk when he didn't dawdle. Along the way he passed the villages of the Bembe and the Fulero; they had little fields, and pigs and chickens grubbed about between their huts.

The school was a dingy little building that stood alone in the meadow, protected from roaming cattle by a bamboo fence on which the pupils hung their jackets. The open shutters allowed a little light to enter the crowded classroom, and before long children's voices would be echoing through the air like the bleating of young goats.

Their parents couldn't read or write, except for the occasional father who'd gone to mission school in the valley and came back as a teacher, or who, after a few fruitless years at school, took to following his cows again, toting the burden of his unripe knowledge. His uncle Mufunga had attended a Belgian school. They were so pleased with him that his grandfather was afraid they'd take him to their own country, and decided to remove him.

"You're always the best one in the class," the teacher told Zikiya, "but we never see your father." Zikiya didn't tell him he was an orphan. Along the way to school he had a stick hidden in the bushes, which he used to beat Bembe children, for he was convinced that his father had been murdered by Bembe rebels. When all the pupils were told to bring their father with them to school, he didn't know what to do. He tagged along behind the father of one of the children and asked him to be his father for a while. The next year the teacher was a relative of his; he ordered him to bring his mother along. Zikiya refused - she didn't have anything to do with school. The man punished him by making him tend the soccer field for a whole week. He'd never forgiven him for that.

Men often took their brother's widow to be their second wife, so she could keep producing children for the family, but his mother didn't get along with his uncles. They would have liked her to go back to her own family and leave her children with them, so they could do as they pleased with her late husband's cows. But she refused to leave: those cows were for Zikiya. "Your uncles are nasty," she said. They said the same thing about her. And soon, about him as well.

One afternoon he came home from school and found his mother and grandmother resting in front of the house: they had just finished pounding corn. He walked past them to go inside, but accidentally knocked over the wooden mortar full of meal. "Look what that orphan's done now!" his grandmother exclaimed. It was as though she'd slapped him across the face. He stood trembling in the doorway while cackling chickens rushed up to pick at the spilled cornmeal and his mother twisted

the mortar back solidly into the ground. "Don't go thinking I'll cry when you're dead," he snapped back at his grandmother.

Inside he took the ball he'd made of old strips of cloth, and hid it under his jacket. He tied the cord of his jacket a little tighter so the ball wouldn't fall out. Then, without a word, he went off into the hills with the cows.

He liked driving the cows out ahead, the best ones up in front, the others meekly tagging along behind. One of his bulls was incredibly strong; whenever it came across the leader of another herd it was sure to start a fight, stubbornly locking horns with its opponent - until the blood ran from their mouths and Zikiya had to pry them apart. He had shaped the curved horns of some of the cows himself when they were just calves, by gnawing off the hard outer layer with his teeth. The blood dripped from *his* mouth then.

The shakiness gradually left his legs. Once he had climbed too high for anyone to see, he pulled out his rag ball. His mother never blamed him for being an orphan. But she did say that, because he didn't have a father, he had no time to play.

The ball had a length of twine attached to it - he would kick it and then reel it in, so he didn't have to keep chasing it downhill. For three years he refused to visit his grandmother, no matter how she begged.

He didn't want to be called Mvuyekure anymore, after his grandfather. He scratched out that name on his exercise book and replaced it with that of his late father. In those days his Uncle Rutebuka, who was very strict, once found him sleeping in the grass outside the village. He poked him in the side with his cane and asked what he thought he was doing there, all alone like that. Zikiya blinked his eyes and looked up at the man in faded trousers and jacket towering over him, a felt hat on his weathered head. "Am I lying in your way?" he said.

The blows of the cane rained down on him, but he shielded his head with his long arms and didn't cry out, so that Rutebuka went bustling off and came back with his mother and aunt. Their clothes flapped in the wind; they had locked their houses quickly behind them and tied the keys in their shawls. "What can you do with a boy like this," his uncle asked, poking him with his cane, "who would rather be alone than with the others?" His mother said nothing; she knew better than to defend him in public, because his uncles wouldn't hesitate to beat her as well.

---

p 108-111

THE EAST, 2001

The Rwandans had grown accustomed to helping themselves to the riches of Congo. Congo was *nyama ya tembo*, the meat of an elephant, they said - you could never eat it all on your own. But now that peace was looming and U.N. commissions were investigating the plundering, the deals were becoming increasingly secretive.

It worked the same way it did in intelligence, Assani noticed: everyone had part of the information, no one knew everything. Through an intermediary, the head of a small Congolese air

transport company in Goma was asked to fly to the airport at Kigali. At Kigali someone handed him twenty-four thousand dollars in cash and asked him to make three return flights to Manono. The man thought about the young woman he had just married, about the little house they hoped to build, put the money in his pocket and kept his questions to himself. At Manono he told the airport official that he came from Goma. Neither he nor the pilot knew what kind of cargo they took aboard, although it wasn't hard to guess. They were phantom flights, unregistered and unreported. Sometimes the raw materials weren't flown directly to Rwanda but to Bukavu, where they crossed the border in trucks, hidden beneath barrels of gasoline.

Since being transferred to Goma, Assani had witnessed more of these deals than ever before. The rebels wanted to maintain their positions and were willing to sell their country down the river in exchange. They went to Kigali all the time, let themselves be wined and dined in fancy hotels, and informed on each other to their Rwandan masters. "The current president of the movement is a Kabila sympathizer," they whispered to them. "Make me the president and I'll be your man in Kinshasa."

The Rwandans told him all about it. They exploited the situation, but in the end looked down on all those little excellencies and five-star rebels whose ambitions were personal rather than national. "BMW's" - Beer, Music, Women - they called them.

Assani once became so enraged by the shady financial deals between the Rwandans and the rebels that he shocked his Banyamulenge friends. Assani, who had the reputation of being an errand boy for the Rwandans ! "Be careful," someone warned him, "you know what they do with people like you."

During a meeting in which yet another deal was being arranged, Assani announced that he wouldn't go along with it. The others looked at him reprovingly - they had already worked out the details beforehand, what was he whining about? James Kabarebe, who had been promoted to chief-of-staff of the Rwandan army, glanced at him in disdain. Assani turned away ashamedly. James looked down on the others for being subservient and opportunistic, but he despised Assani most of all, because he opposed what they were doing but was unable to stop it.

Not long afterwards, Assani was put on non-active. He had become a troublesome witness. They sent him to a military camp in Rwanda, ostensibly for training, but it felt like a punishment.

Every once in a while he would call Aimée. She was happy to be with her family again, but having a hard time getting used to life in the little town on the American east coast where she had ended up. One morning she awoke and, for the first time in her life, saw snow. For as far as she could see, everything was white. On an impulse, she called him. She suddenly felt so sad and alone, she said, at the thought that she couldn't show him this.

He had one weekend off each month, and would drive to Gisenyi to see how work on the house was coming along. Sometimes he visited a nearby family, to drink milk. Devota, the daughter of the house, was nineteen - still only a girl. One evening on the front patio they struck up a conversation. After that he saw her more often. He needed to forget Aimée, he told himself. He had to make one more child - he owed it to his mother. Once Devota became pregnant, he felt satisfied. Now he could die untroubled.

***

But he didn't die. Instead new peace talks began in South Africa, and Rwanda was forced to withdraw from the rest of Eastern Congo as well. In Kabalo the news hit like a bombshell. Under the inspirational leadership of trainer Mutombo, Commander Satellite's football team had just won the MONUC Cup.

The Rwandans were bitter. One day they had shouted that they would never leave Congo, the next day they were packing their bags. "What do you expect, this is politics," a Rwandan commander told Mutombo. Old Kabila was an idiot, he laughed; he bragged about how many enemies he had killed here, but the Rwandans had made even more babies with Congolese women.

The truck they had confiscated shortly before was stripped - only the carcass remained behind at the station. Mwansa stood looking on in his gleaming safari suit, hands clasped behind his back. The officers were sorry to leave, he could tell, but the common soldiers were glad it was over.

The footballs all went with as well, and some of the Rwandans even left carrying bags of mangos. Commander Satellite wanted to take Mutombo along - a bright future lay in store for him as trainer in Rwanda, he believed, but Mutombo didn't dare leave his family unprotected.

The administrator of Kabalo – a weak, sensitive soul who had come in from the *brousse* because his grandchild was dying and was collared immediately by the Rwandans because of his schooling - remained behind with the neon light a Rwandan officer had given him. The Rwandans had let him charge the battery at their headquarters. A lamp and a battery, that was all this war had left him. Now he'd have to make friends with the MONUC - they had a generator.

***

The South Africans certainly have their act together, Assani thought as he rolled down the four-lane highway from Johannesburg airport to Sun City, where the military commission would meet to prepare the reunification of the Congolese army.

They'd told him Sun City was a hotel, but it was a whole city, with pavilions, swimming pools, outdoor cafes, discotheques, playing fields and casinos. His countrymen sauntered down the streets, dined in fancy restaurants and made themselves right at home, but Assani was intimidated by so much perfection. Roads without potholes, buildings without leaky air conditioners, cars without rust spots - it all underscored the flagrant decline of his own country. A few months earlier the Nyiragongo volcano had erupted in Goma; half the city was wiped out. The people had begun building hodgepodge atop the lava again. One of them had named his ramshackle little shop *Anti-Lave*.

The meetings of the military commission put Assani right back in the middle of Congo again. There they were, the *Mobutists*, who had lost two consecutive wars and still didn't know the meaning of shame, the Katangese, in whom he'd never detected a whit of insight but who acted as though they had cornered the market on wisdom, and the Mayi Mayi, who had pulled the chestnuts out of the fire for the others and had shown up to collect their reward.

The first few days, all Assani did was listen. Only when he saw that the government delegation was seriously thinking of promoting some of the Mayi Mayi to battalion commander and general did he ask to speak.

"The Mayi Mayi come from the *brousse*," he said. "They aren't fit for positions of leadership - they have no discipline. It would be better to appoint them to the general staff, so they can first learn how to behave themselves."

"I'm not from the *brousse*!" one of the Mayi Mayi shouted, pointing at Assani. "But him, he's a criminal, he fought against us and killed us for years!"

A general from the Equatorial Province had been fidgeting in his chair. "The Mayi Mayi are patriots," he said. "Thanks to them, Congo still exists today."

"You don't know them," Assani said. "They're not civilized. Mark my words: the next war you people fight will be against them."

"Not the integration of the Mayi Mayi, but the integration of the rebels would be irresponsible," the general hissed. "If *they* come to Kinshasa, we'll have to protect Kabila against *them*."

After the meeting, Assani told his colleagues: "Just watch, if that general starts talking again I'm going to say something that will shut him up for two days."

The next morning, when the general launched into an ode to Kabila, Assani asked to speak**.** "We have a problem here," he said, looking around the table. His gaze rested on the general. "That one over there, he's our problem - it's because of people like him that we're headed for another twenty years of misery." The man was taken aback by Assani's nerve. "And why is he a problem?" Assani went on calmly. "Because all he cares about is Kabila and the government faction, while we have come here to talk about the future of Congo. Kabila will die one day, but Congo will remain."

Then he spoke directly to the general. "You are a toady," he said. "Kabila will find out that we are the best soldiers he has, because instead of flattering him we will point out his mistakes. It's people like you who will kill Kabila. How can you expect a president to function if his soldiers screen him off from everything? His bodyguards should come from all over the country. Your best protection isn't a soldier from your own people, but the guy you drink a Fanta with every now and again."

The general was staring at him angrily. "I'm sure you attended a military academy," Assani said. "But I bet you've never been to war."

"See what I mean!" the general shouted. "I've always said they were arrogant!"

General Diallo, the Senegalese commander of the MONUC operation, had been watching them and took the two men aside after the meeting. The general backed down quickly: he hadn't really meant what he said; that was just the way people in Kinshasa talked about the rebels.

Diallo was intrigued by the tall, skinny rebel who sometimes, in all his impetuosity, said things that hit the mark. In the months that followed they saw each other regularly at military meetings, and Assani accepted the wise advice of the older Diallo.

Assani had seen the reunification of the army and the arrival of the UN peacekeeping force as a farce, but it was General Diallo who calmed him down when emotions ran high, and who prepared him for the decision that would soon arrive and sweep Assani along powerfully.

Afande: (Swahili) commander
Banyamulenge: people of Mulenge
Mayi Mayi: (Swahili) literally: Water Water
Popular militias (or members of such militias) in eastern Congo, defenders of their ancestral ground; legend has it that bullets roll off them like water.

MONUC : *Mission de l'Organisation des Nations Unies en République Démocratique du Congo*; UN peacekeeping force
Mzee : (Swahili) wise old man; nickname of Laurent-Désiré Kabila
pagne: a garment consisting of a rectangular strip of cloth, wrapped on the body so as to form a short skirt.