

UGANDA MARTYRS: PLACE AND ROLE OF WOMEN

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Abstract

This article examines the place and role of women in the Uganda Martyrs' story. Many people both men and women wonder what women have to do with the Uganda Martyrs' story since it is commonly known that there were no women martyrs among the people who were killed during 1885-1887. Most of the books written on the Uganda Martyrs are either silent or present a fringe and scanty picture of women in the Martyrdom story. This article studies the history and the story of the Uganda Martyrs from a woman's point of view. Thus, this article applies the historical approach to examine the place and role of women in the Uganda Martyrs' story within the socio-historical context of the early Church in Uganda. The historical method as used in this article helps to approach the account in a sequential manner and brings in view the story of the Uganda Martyrs as well the Ugandan women participation in the events. The primary sources of information are the historical books and records on the Uganda Martyrs. Consequently, the Ugandan women who participated with the Martyrs such as Sarah Nakima, Mubulire Fanny and Princess Clara Nalumansi are brought into view and their contribution to the church emphasised. The article further examines the implications of martyrdom and women for contemporary Church in Uganda as it discusses the challenges and way forward. The article concludes by emphasising the need for women to read history with the view of highlighting their role and contribution to the development and growth of the church for the benefits of both contemporary and future community.

1 INTRODUCTION

The story of the Uganda Martyrs has been told and written since 1889 (Ashe 1970:112-231; Faupel 1965, Ssemakula 1983). On 3 June 2007 the Martyrs were remembered with reflection on the place and role of women in spreading the Gospel of Christ in Uganda. Highlighting the place and role of women in martyrdom was significant, as we got to hear the story of the Uganda Martyrs from women's perspective. The Martyrs' story of faith in the Church of Uganda was read and reflected on from the women's point of view, the challenges, and the implications for contemporary church emphasised.

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During 1885-1887 many people especially young men, were killed because of their faith in Jesus Christ. During that time in Buganda and in many places in the world women and children had no voice; only a few isolated cases of women such as the Namasole (Queen mother) and the Lubuga (sister of the king) were respected. In spite of all that, all the young men and people who were killed for the sake of their faith were born of a woman, who breast fed them, raised and inspired them with trust and resilience which enabled them to Obey God unto death.

2 THE COMING OF CHRISTIANITY AND MARTYRDOM IN BUGANDA

The Uganda Martyrs were killed during the reign of Kabaka (King) Mwanga, from 1885-1887. The gospel had been preached in Uganda for only eight years. King Muteesa I had invited the missionaries in 1875, after receiving H M Stanley a Christian explorer and journalist who taught him some rudiments of Christianity (Stanley 1878:3). Muteesa became interested in the new religion and he wrote to the Queen of England a letter asking for Christian teachers to come and teach Christianity to the Baganda. The letter appeared in the "The Daily Telegraph" in November 1875. The first Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries arrived in Buganda on 30 June 1877. These were Lt S Smith and Rev C T Wilson; A Mackay joined them in 1878. In 1879 the White Father from France; Fr Loudrel and Brother Amans also arrived and they started teaching Catholicism.

When King Muteesa I died (1884) his Son Prince Mwanga succeeded the throne. King Mwanga's reign began when there were a lot of conflicting teaching from the different faith groups in the Kingdom. At that time there were the Protestants, the Catholics, Muslims and traditionalists. Kabaka Mwanga set off with extreme dislike for the missionaries of all faiths, since he had seen what had transpired in his late Father's reign. Also during that time many pages converted to Christianity, something which the king and his chiefs resented. This was mainly because the King thought the missionaries had come to take over his kingdom. Due to all those fears, divination was on the increase as the elders were consulting the Lubaaes (divinities) about the confusion in the Kingdom (Ashe 1974:66-72; Ssebalugga 1995:3). The king's hatred for the Christians continued to grow and finally he decided to kill them off, so as to clear off Christianity in the kingdom.

3 WOMEN AND MARTYRS

3.1 Sarah Nakima and the first group of the Martyrs

Sarah Nakima was among the first group of the faithful Christians who were captured, tortured and led to the slaughter place at Busega -Mpiima-erebera in January 1885. Sarah was one of people who converted to Christianity and were baptised by Rev R P Ashe O'Flaherty in 1883. After her baptism Sarah married Firipo Mukasa by Christian rite. Firipo Mukasa later died of small pox and Sarah was left as widow with the responsibility of nursing and caring for her only baby boy. Sarah and her baby were captured with the young pages of the King Mwanga these included: Makko Kakumba, Noah Sserwanga and

Yusuf Lugalama. When Sarah and the young pages were seized, she stood with her colleagues and courageously marched to the slaughter place at Busega -Mpiima-erebera. The young men were killed on 31 January 1885 at Busega -Mpiima-erebera. These were the first Christians to be martyred. They were mutilated and burnt to death; Sarah was exonerated and set free with her baby (Taylor 1958:56).

Historical records provide some divergences on Sarah the faithful young woman. Some refer to her as Sarah Nakima (Taylor 1958:56) and others Sarah Nalwanga and it is said that she might have been related to king Mwanga (Faupel 1962:75). However Mackay as quoted by Faupel wrote that the king even had intentions of putting Sarah in his harem (Faupel 1962:75). However, what comes out clearly in all sources is that Sarah was captured along with three young men and led to slaughter place at Busega -Mpiima-erebera. She had a baby, was exonerated, after which she was tortured by being made to attend the burning of her fellow converts and later was later put in stocks (Faupel 1962:75). Considering all these facts and the social cultural context of Buganda then, a woman with a baby could not be killed. In all circumstances, the innocent child had to be protected. Therefore, one can conclude that Sarah only escaped death when the executioner at Busega -Mpiima-erebera exonerated her possibly because she had a baby.

Sarah's torture and escape was not the end of the Christians' persecution, for on 29 October 1885, Bishop James Hannington the first Bishop of Eastern Equatorial Province was also killed at Kyando in Busoga. Bishop Hannington was killed because he was suspected to be an enemy of the kingdom, since he used the eastern route (Busoga) to enter Buganda Kingdom (Ashe 1974:70-77). At that time there was a belief that the enemies who would conquer and occupy Buganda would come through the eastern route.

3.2 The Martyrs who were killed at Namugongo

Although the brutal killing of the young pages and Bishop James Hannington shocked the Christians, it did not quench the zeal of the faithful. To the surprise and annoyance of the King and his chiefs more people converted to Christianity. This infuriated Kabaka Mwanga and his chiefs and on 3 June 1886, the King ordered for the execution of 26 pages: thirteen (13) of these were Protestant and twelve (12) were Catholics. Twenty five (25) of these were killed after being tortured at Namugongo-Nakiyanja. They were made to collect fire wood and reeds for seven days and they tightly strapped in pyre and burnt them to death. The slow and cruel process of torture was meant to force the young men to denounce their faith. However, the young men stood firm in their faith. The executioner told the young men that they were being killed by lubaale (divinities), Nnende, Mukasa, and Kibuuka whom they despised and rejected. Through all that tribulation, the young men kept praying and singing waiting to be with their Lord Jesus Christ. Charles Lwanga is the 26th martyr who was also tightly strapped in pyre and burnt to death at Namugongo-Bulooli the Roman Catholic shrine (Ssemakula 1983:26-28).

Many other faithful Christians were killed in several other places and their remains were never found. For this reason it is not easy to tell the number of

Christians both men and women who were killed during that period. In all, it is important for us to imagine the wailing of the women and mothers who were crying for their children. This may be likened to Mary the mother of Jesus Christ, who cried for her son as he was being tortured and hanged on the cross at Golgotha (Jn 19:25). However, the people who condemned and killed the young men were surprised by the courage and unwavering faith of the Martyrs. This also led many people to convert to Christianity and the number of the faithful continued to grow. The blood of the Martyrs then became a seed which was sown by the Lord Jesus Christ and it grew into the church in Buganda and in Uganda as whole.

4 WOMEN AND THE GOSPEL 1885-1902

As we reflect on Uganda Martyrs and their contribution to the Church in Uganda, we ought to remember that the work of spreading the gospel of Christ would not be possible without the contribution of women, the mothers of the nation. For instance, we remember the faithful **Sarah Nakima** who courageously marched with the first three martyrs to the execution grounds at Busega -Mpiima-erebera and was exonerated because of her baby. Sarah's example and testimony was fundamental for the church then and now. If it were not for her baby we would be celebrating a woman martyr today. Nevertheless, Sarah's belief and faith in God which made her to stand firm with those young men only serves to highlight her contribution and place in the community of believers at that time.

There are also other women who courageously preached the gospel, such as **Mbulire Fanny** the widow of Fred Kizza one of the Uganda Martyrs killed on 3 June 1886 at Namugongo. Mbulire converted to Christianity and was baptised in 1883. In the same year she married Fred Kizza in holy matrimony. This lady preached the gospel to her household and she taught the word of God to many servants in the King's palace (Taylor 1958:54). However, we can rightly observe that the fire which burnt Mbulire's husband Fred Kizza not only left a scar on her heart but also encouraged her to firmly preach the word of God.

Princess Clara Nalumansi was the sister of King Mwanga also converted to Christianity and she accepted to be baptised during the time when the Christians were being persecuted. Nalumansi shocked King Mwanga when she decided to burn the lubaale (divinity) stuff she had. She even went ahead and married in church, in spite of the fact that it was taboo for a princess to marry. Princess Nalumansi is the one who warned the missionaries Mackay, R P Ashe and O'Flaherty about King Mwanga's plot to kill them. She advised them to propitiate the king before his anger raged on them (Ashe 1974:79; Mackay 1905:313). This indeed was a brave and gracious act and through Princess Nalumansi God saved the missionaries. In May 1889 Princess Nalumansi was ruthlessly burnt to death by her Muslim brother King Kalema during the Christian and Muslim struggle for power in Buganda (Ashe 1971:126-127). King Kalema feared that the Christians could easily oust him and crown Princess Nalumansi as queen of Buganda kingdom.

The faithfulness of the above mentioned women further helped to inspire other women to serve God with courage. One of the most renowned women is **Lakeeri Tebulimbwa Ssebuliba**, a widow who preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to people on the Buvuma Islands. Lakeeri (Rachel) is mentioned as one of the noble, courageous and self-less Baganda teachers of the gospels who risked and often gave their life to carry the gospel. Thus Bishop Tucker observed:

Such a case was that of a woman Lakeeri, who after hearing that sleeping sickness broke out on a heathen island, volunteered to go, nor did the warning that it meant almost certain death deter her. Ere long she returned with the news of many won to Christ. Then back again to the heroic task, till in a few months she was brought to Mengo hospital a victim to the disease. Even in her weakness she was a source of comfort and strength to many a dying sufferer in the wards (Shepherd 1929:157).

While on mission Lakeeri contracted sleeping sickness and she died in 1902. She was later buried at Namirembe Cathedral. This lady is one of the good examples of the selfless Christians of her time. Lakeeri was the paternal grandmother of the late Bishop Dunstan Nsubuga of Namirembe Diocese (Ward 1989:22).

5 CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

The faith and example of Sara Nakima, Mubulire Fanny, Princess Clara Nalumansi Lakeeri and Uganda Martyrs has continued to inspire the growth of the church in Uganda. Through their example the gospel of Christ has touched many people and is freeing women from many dehumanising circumstances which undermine the position in which God placed them when He created them in His image (Gen 1:27). Women are now serving in the church and different position in the nation. However, there are still many challenges that are being faced by women both in church and in the nation at large. First of all the ministry of women in the church is yet to be given its rightful place. Although 80% of the church congregations are women, men have 95% of the key leadership positions. For instance in all the dioceses found in the central part of Uganda there is not even a single woman archdeacon or bishop!!

Furthermore, if we consider the Agricultural sector, women in Uganda constitute 80% of agricultural labour force, but only 30% have control over the proceeds. Many women can not do viable businesses or access loans since they do not own capital assets such as land. Only 9% of the women in Uganda own land and have control over it (Land Alliance Records). Many women and girls have no access to good health care service, others are abused in their homes, while those in war-torn areas such as the Northern Uganda, suffer horrific violence and oppression. Worse still, it is reported that fourteen women die everyday in labour or due to maternal health related problems (Ssenkooba et al. [n.d.]). Such circumstance, undermine the cause for which the Uganda Martyrs died. This is because Jesus whom the Martyrs believed and faithfully followed unto death is the prince of peace who announces liberation and freedom for all the oppressed (Lk 4:18-19). God created both men and women to reflect his glory on earth, therefore as we remember the Uganda martyrs,

God who does not discriminate, against nationality or gender (Gal 3: 28) help us as church to put right whatever has gone wrong, repent and witness for Jesus Christ the saviour of all.

The church in Uganda ought to remember that all the young men and people who were killed for the sake of their faith, were born of a woman, who breast fed them, raised and inspired them with the trust and resilience which enabled them to obey God unto death. Our grandparents, who are the mothers of the Martyrs, the women who faithfully marched to “death”, preached the gospel of Christ and the Uganda Martyrs, challenge church to stand firm in Christ and denounce all evil which undermine the wellbeing of the people of God. We are called to stand together with all crowds of witnesses, women and men who trusted God to the end (Heb 12:1-2).

Finally considering the value of the story of the women who participated with the Uganda Martyrs as unfolded in this article, there is need for women to read history with the view of highlighting their role and contribution to the development and growth the church for the benefits of both contemporary and future community of God.

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