

THE LIFE AND CAREER OF NABONGO MUMIA

Family Background

Mumia was born a prince between 1849 and 1852: His parents were Nabongo Shiundu Wamukoya and his mother, Wamanya. The first five children of Wamanya died in infancy. It was believed that evil spirits were responsible for their deaths. To appease the evil spirits, a child would be placed on the wayside as rubbish (Makokha) according to the customs. The child was then picked up by somebody told in advance, or a stranger, and the mother, or her agent, spied on the passers-by from a nearby bush. The mother or agent emerged from the hideout and claimed the child.

The future Mumia was placed on the wayside as rubbish (Makokha). The child was then picked by somebody called in Luhya Abamia (singular, Mumia or Omumia and the child was named Mumia in memory of the incident. So, the child's full name became Makokha Mumia. It was the name Mumia which stuck because the child was born at a time when Abamia were at war with Abawanga.

There is little information about the early life of Mumia. He grew up as an ordinary child. Before the age of 18 years, he looked after cattle and played games such as wrestling, tug-of-war, gliding on slippery slopes and jumping in a loop. He socialised like any Muluhyia child. For instance, in the evenings, he kept fire burning and exchanged stories and proverbs. He trapped animals like the hare, moles- and squirrels. He also chased away birds which destroyed crops.

When he was over 18 years, Mumia hunted animals like the bush buck, gazelle, warthog, hippopotamus, rhinocerus, buffalo, eland, leopard and lion. It is said that Mumia killed a lion and leopard on separate occasions. Games, sports and socialization were methods of training the youth for leadership. Courage, discipline and honesty were inculcated in the youth, and certainly they were essential for the royal offspring.

The interesting aspect of young Mumia was that he was timid and shy to strangers. Shiundu concluded that Mumia was weak and feminine in character, and he refused to appreciate his good qualities. For example, Mumia was slender-and tall, had a deep voice, and was a pleasant young man. These qualities commanded respect among his peers. However, Shiundu did not prepare him to be a King.

The Nabongo Inheritance

Mumia succeeded his father not by tradition but through circumstances. The eldest son, Mulama, who was supposed to succeed by tradition, died when he was young. Luta was next in the line but Wamanya wanted her only child to be king and she was aware of Shiundu's low rating of Mumia's character. She therefore manoeuvred, intrigued and succeeded in making Mumia the Nabongo. She tricked Luta into wearing shimbishira (head-dress) meant for heroes. That meant that Luta wanted to depose his father and inherit the throne. It had not happened before.

Shiundu therefore acted swiftly and promptly. He disinherited Luta both of the Nabongship and property. He even threatened to appoint a female heir. It was suggested to him by his advisers who had been courted by Wamanya, that Mumia should inherit the Nabongship. Shiundu did not appoint another heir until the eve of his death when he reluctantly accepted Makokha Mumia as his successor. He appointed Nanjira as the Deputy Nabongo. The decisions were made either in 1879 or 1882. The traditional ceremonies followed.

A bull, tied with a rope held by Nanjira was placed at the door of the hut, where Shiundu's body lay in state funeral. Mumia speared the bull, it ran into the hut, and fell near the corpse. This meant that the succession was blessed. The bull was skinned and Shiundu's body was wrapped in the skin. The body was buried, in a sitting position, in Wamanya's house. Later, the bones were removed and buried at Matungu, the traditional site for the Nabongos. The two ceremonies were accompanied by a festive extravagance of eating, dancing and singing. Important elders of Abalukhobe clan in Tiriki and those from the "royal" clans attended the ceremonies.

The events climaxed in the coronation of Mumia. The elders of Abakalibo clan, Kangoti and Mande, put a copper bracelet on Mumia's wrist. This bracelet was the crown. They also dressed him in a colobus monkey skin called likutusi. The royal regalia was kept by elders of Abakalibo clan. It was not released until the death of the next Nabongo and the succession of another. Mumia appointed Kangetia, the Master of Ceremonies, as Omwikhashira. He was the Chief Adviser and Chief Courtier. The post was equivalent to that of Prime Minister in our times.

Mumia the Nabongo

Mumia was the 17th Nabongo of the Wanga Kingdom. (See diagram of the Wanga genealogy and Abashitsetse Dynasty below) The Nabongo was the executive head of the central government. He was the final counsellor and adviser, because he was automatically regarded as wise, benign, benevolent and neutral. The Nabongo was the source of peace and stability. He was also the custodian of traditions and customs of Abawanga and Abashitsetse Dynasties. Let us discuss in detail how Nabongo Mumia carried out these functions of leadership.

Wanga Kingdom was a confederation of co-equal clandoms. The kingdom was divided into tsihanga (singular lihanga) which was in turn divided into tsimbia (singular oluhya). Tsimbia were divided into tsiungongo (singular olukongo). The descending order of the remaining areas was the clan, village and family. The common denominator of administration at all levels except the family, was the Council of Elders, The composition depended on the size of the area. The elders were independent, but subject to the Nabongo who exercised indirect influence over them in the regions. At the court, his influence was direct. He appointed Abakali belitokho, (the king's elders at Court) Weyengo (i.e. Chief Judge) and Eshibusu (the Judge).

The Nabongo was the head of the legislative and executive bodies. He was assisted in these bodies by the courtiers. These were experts in military matters, foreign affairs and rain-making. There were also members of the judiciary headed by Weyengo. They constituted the Court of Appeal.

Eshiabusi linked the executive and the judiciary. The elders in his council were voluntary members. They were assisted by legal experts drawn from the local government. The Weyengo presided over all deliberations. It was this arrangement which reduced the chances of a civil war. The power struggle was restricted in Abashitsetse Dynasty.

The Nabongo was the custodian of traditions and customs of the land. He guarded the royal regalia which consisted of the copper bracelet, sacred spears, likutusi and lishimbishira. Europeans regarded the royal regalia as sources of superstitions and primitivity. V. R. Dundas, the District Commissioner at Mumias, described the copper bracelet as follows. He wrote:

“All kinds of superstitions are woven round Mumia’s copper bracelet by the common people, who regard it with the greatest awe and reverence. One of these is to the effect that if the King wishes to cause death to anyone, he can~ do so by striking together at dead of night this bracelet with another he wears on the other wrist, pronouncing at the same time the person’s name.”

On the sacred spears Dundas wrote:

“The sacred spears are of very great age and several of them are of peculiar pattern and workmanship unlike any I have ever seen in Africa.... It is believed that a man can cause civil strife throughout the Kavirondo country by taking them outside and pointing with them in different directions. For this reason they are always carefully guarded. When they were shown to me, I was told that they had for over ten year not been taken out of the hut, where they are wrapped up in grass and tied to the centre pole. Only the chief (the Nabongo), his wife or mother, and a circumcised Mukalibo, whose age is of no consequence, may hold them.”

There was nothing superstitious or primitive about the royal regalia. The royal regalia was the source and continuity of Wanga history and Abashitsetse Dynasty.

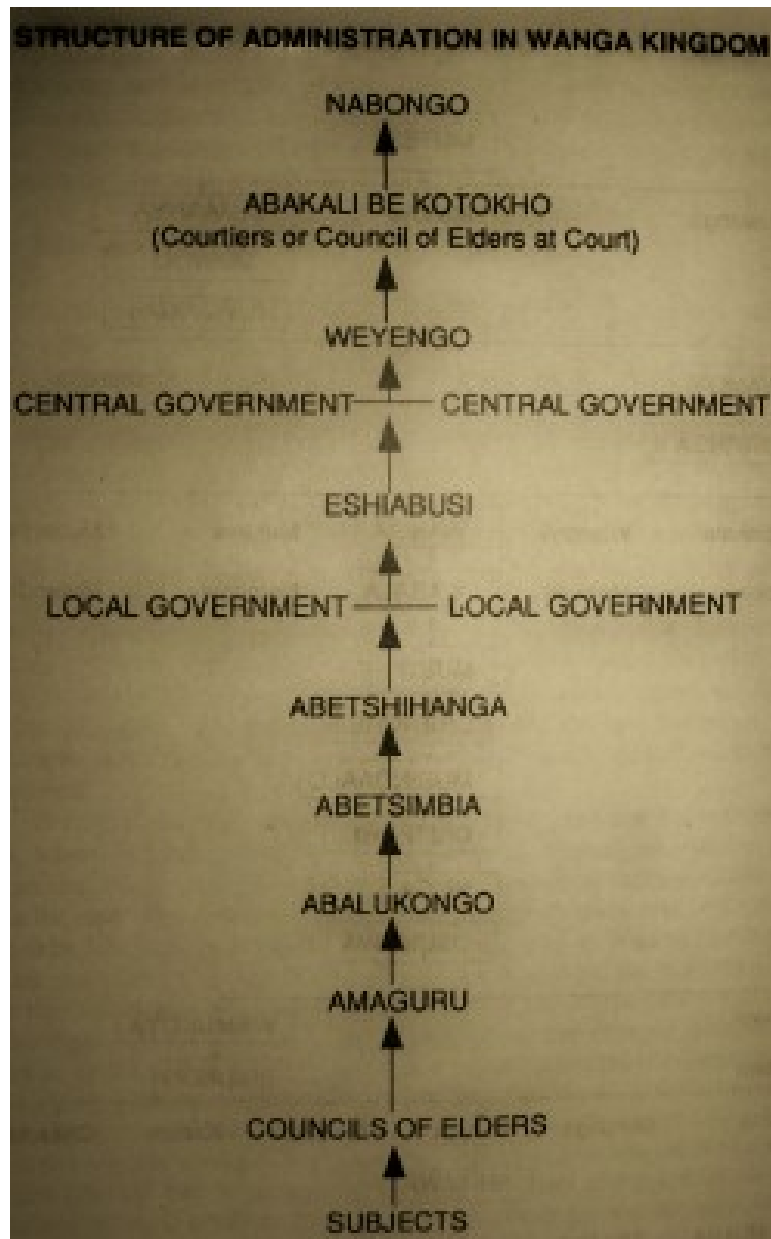
We have seen that Mumia became king through circumstances contrived by his mother. According to his father, he was not fit to inherit the Nabongoship. The character and personality of Mumia emerged well when he was king. He became king at 30 or 33 years. He was thin and tall. He was slow in action, shrewd, and ready to take advantage of any situation as chance or circumstances availed themselves. He was generous, pleasant, cheerful and just. Mumia kept a low profile and he was the last to speak on legislative, executive and judicial issues. He had a deep voice, but he did not use it. He spoke softly and an announcer repeated what he said loudly for all to hear. Nabongo Osundwa and Nabongo Shiundu had also practised their leadership in this way.

Nabongo Mumia also continued the tradition of inculcating and practising responsibility and efficiency. He rewarded or punished his courtiers and other subordinates. “He often summarily dismissed his servants and divorced his wives for displaying irresponsibility.” Mumia showed one difference from the practice of his immediate predecessors. He listened to the petitions of the commoners and acted on them. As a result of this, he was very popular; he was a living legend.

We get an idea of the character and personality of Nabongo Mumia from Joseph Thompson. He was a British traveller who arrived at Elureko on December 3rd, 1881. He had disapproved that the dreaded Maasailand could not be crossed by Europeans. He described the encounter with Mumia in the following way. He wrote:

“The present chief is a mild, effeminate chief and pleasant man, and we were soon on the best of terms with each other. Though of sluggish temperament, and possessing none of the mental activity of the Maasai, he enjoyed enormously examining my photographs. He became so enthusiastic over the charms of one young lady, who was represented posing aesthetically over a sun flower, that he gave me a large order to a bevy after that pattern at two tusks of ivory a head. I said I would see what I would do for him.”

Nabongo Mumia was therefore shrewd and benevolent. He was the right successor of Nabongo Shiundu. The Wanga Kingdom had reached a period of decline. It needed a leader such as Mumia to support it. In the next chapter, we shall see how Nabongo Mumia collaborated with British colonisers and saved the immediate collapse of his kingdom.



Source: Makers of Kenya's History, Nabongo Mumia, Simon Kenyanchui, Heinemann 1992; ISBN 9966-46-808-0