

How Nabongo Mumia Transformed Luhyaland

The social, economic and political changes which took place in colonial Africa can be viewed in two ways. The first approach is to view the changes as coming from the African initiative, i.e that the Africans took the first steps in starting and determining the course of the changes. The second approach is to view the changes as having been started by the colonialists and Africans responded to them, and in some ways determined their course.

In the context of this biography we know nothing about Nabongo Mumia's initiative or that of the people in the area. It was only political consciousness which elites developed as a result of the controversy surrounding Mumia's paramountcy and the need for local chiefs. The colonial administration and the missionaries improved the infrastructure to facilitate effective rule and evangelisation respectively.

Nabongo Mumia tried to adapt to colonialism. He was not a moderniser. For example, in 1910, Mumia bought a bicycle. He was the first man to do so in Buluhya. He later exchanged the bicycle for a rickshaw, then a horse and lastly a car in the 1920s. There is an interesting story associated with the bicycle. Mumia's bicycle got a puncture and an Arab trader at Mumias mended it. The Arab called himself a "doctor" of bicycles. He was paid one herd of cattle for repairing (i.e "curing") a puncture. The man made a fortune and when the trick was discovered, he escaped to Kisumu. Abawanga with bicycles became notorious in Buluhya as "bicycle doctors."

Abawanga with bicycles removed air from their bicycle tyres when they "visited" the local people as Nabongo Mumia's messengers or tax collectors. They demanded either a cow or bull to avenge the wrath of the Nabongo Mumia. If there was a beautiful girl, they asked for her to be Nabongo Mumia's wife. The tricks were again discovered. The Abawanga, Arabs and Europeans were suspects in many Luhya areas. Due to the cunning and corrupt nature of the Wanga agents, economic and social "modernisation" lagged behind.

The factors of social transformation in Buluhya were the foreign religions, (Islam and Christianity) and the colonial administration. Islam was brought to Wanga by Swahili and Arab traders from the middle of the 19th century. Many Wangas were converted.

The Swahili and Arab Moslems at Mumias were circumcisers, advisers and medicine-men. They were also tax-collectors clerks for the colonial administration. Between 1902 and 1907, they occupied an envious position around Nabongo Mumia and in the colonial administration. They gave favourable reports to the District Commissioner about the chiefs who gave them feasts during tax-collection visits, or gave them some of the taxes. John Ainsworth, the Provincial Commissioner from 1907 to 1917, sacked them. They only remained advisers and medicine-men of Mumia, as well as circumcisers of Wanga Moslems. Islam confined its impact to Wanga.

In Maragoli, few Moslems were found. A mosque was built at Mbale in the 1930s. Islam was not popular to non-Wanga Luhya, mainly because Moslems were associated with cunning and corrupt practices. One still hears a claim that Abawanga, were spoiled by Arab and Swahili Moslems.

A Muswahili means a cunning and corrupt person. The activities such as the bicycle-story summarised above, made Abawanga to be called Abaswahili. Furthermore, Islam was unpopular because Arabs, Swahili and Wanga agents practised slave trade, which continued during the colonial period. It was Christianity which was popular and had a significant impact in Buluhya.

The main Christian denominations before the First World War, were the Protestants and Catholics. They penetrated Buluhya from Buganda. The church Missionary Society (CMS) started operating near Mount Elgon in 1894. In 1905, CMS was in Vihiga. The Roman Catholics started their work in 1901 In 1904 they were at Mumias and in 1906 they were at Kakamega In 1902, the Friends Africa Mission (FAM) was operating in Buluhya.

To avoid the rivalry which had caused suffering and death in Buganda in the 1880s, the Protestants and Catholics demarcated their respective areas of evangelisation in 1905 FAM was to operate in Buluhya and CMS in Luo. They agreed that no mission station should be located within a radius of ten miles from each other. Consequently, the CMS built a mission station at Butere in 1912 on land donated by Chief Joseph Mulama because it was about ten miles from Mumias where the Catholics were.

After the First World War, other denominations evangelised Abaluhya. The Salvation Army and Seventh Day Adventists, affiliated to the Pentecostal Assemblies of God, can be singled out After the First World War, the denominations east Of the Rift Valley spread in Buluhya. The Christian missions did not undermine African traditions and customs as they had done in Kikuyu. They were syncretic i.e, they combined European and African beliefs.

Some Africans opposed Christianity and formed their own independent churches. One of these was “Dini Ya Musambwa” by Elijah Masinde of Bukusu. It stressed African-beliefs, eg dead spirits, and practices, eg polygamy. It was and-European and anti-modern. It became a nationalist movement, it was banned. Elijah ‘Masinde continued to oppose Jomo Kenyatta’s Harambee Government. At present it is banned but still has followers.

The infrastructure was improved by the railway and road-tracks. The original plan for the Uganda Railway was that it would pass through Kabras to Mumias to Port Victoria on the lakeshore in Ugenya. This was changed, and the railhead rested at Port Florence, renamed Kisumu, in 1901. It was proposed in 1912, that the line would be extended from Kisumu to Mumias, to transport simsim and maize grown in abundance by Abaluhya since 1908. The First World War delayed the implementation of the proposal. In 1928, it was extended to Butere instead of Mumias. It was not extended to Mumias for it was argued that the Nakuru-Kampala line served Elgon Nyanza well from the stations at Broderick Falls (now called Webuye) and Bungoma.

The road-tracks were constructed to facilitate administration and evangelisation. The first good road passed through Kabras from Uasin Gishu to Wanga Mukulu. It proceeded along the present main road to Mumias. Tracks were built from Mumias to Yala in 1901, Kisumu to Maseno in 1906 by Mr. Savile of CMS and Maseno to Vihiga, also by Mr. Savile of CMS. Two bridges over River Nzoia were destroyed by

Ababukusu in 1906, to stop the tax collectors. They were “punished” in 1908. A Suspension Bridge over River Nzoia was built in 1910. It made it possible for heavy traffic to flow from Kisumu to Mumias. The first motor car was used by John Ainsworth in 1915. In 1916, an Indian trader used the track. In 1919, an Indian trader arrived at Mumias in a lorry. Nabongo Mumia was the first African to own a car in the 1920s.

The political development attracted the attention of the colonial officers and the chiefs. The centre of the politics was anti Wanga agents and Nabongo Mumia’s Paramountcy. People opposed Wanga chiefs from the beginning of their work. By 1939, the locations of North and Central Kavirondo had got indigenous chiefs. It is interesting that most of the chiefs wanted Nabongo Mumia to be recognised as the Paramount Chief. It was their feeling that the failure to recognise Mumia’s Paramountcy, undermined his royalty, and this reflected European disrespect of African traditions, culture and history. Mumia became the centre of political consciousness in Kavirondo.

The agitation was channelled by the Kavirondo Taxpayers’ Welfare Association (KTWA), initiated by Archdeacon Owen of CMS in 1923. The colonial officers made it to split into Luhya and Luo camps in 1925. The Luhya formed North Kavirondo Taxpayers’ Welfare Association (NKTWA) while the Luo formed the South Kavirondo Taxpayers’ Welfare Association (SKTWA). NKTWA insisted on the paramountcy of Mumia, while SKTWA wanted a Paramount Chief from Central Kavirondo. The Catholics decided to compete with the CMS; they founded the Native Catholic Union (NCU) in 1924. It supported the SKTWA.

The mission educated people did not join NKTWA, SKTWA and NCU. They formed the Kavirondo Central Association (KCA). It split along ethnic lines as the KTWA had. Mumia did not play any role in the formation of KCA. His younger brother, Joseph Mulama did. In 1940, Mumia joined the chiefs in North Kavirondo, and formed the Buluhya Welfare Association (BWA) because the North Kavirondo Central Association had voluntarily dissolved itself. Furthermore, the colonial government prescribed any political activity following the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Mumia’s action was therefore defiant.

The members of BWA supported or joined the Kenya African Study Union (KASU), later renamed the Kenya African Union (KAU). It is said that Jomo Kenyatta visited Mumia in the late 1940s. He wanted to be counselled on how to fight for Uhuru. Mumia thought that Kenyatta was joking. How could he talk about such things: could a Whiteman who flies in the sky be thrown out of Kenya? Mumia wanted moderation of political agitation against the British. He did not witness the development of politics around his role in the colonial government. He died in 1949.

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